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# Carson McCullers and the Tradition of Romance.

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CARSON McCULLERS AND THE  
TRADITION OF ROMANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Richard Chase, in The American Novel and Its Tradition, defines the qualities of a uniquely American genre, the romance-novel: the subordination of verisimilitude to fantasy and melodrama; the dominance of imagery, metaphor, and symbol in a narrative technique that is often mythic; and a Manichaeian tendency to polarize experience in terms of light-dark imagery and spirit-body categories. The novels of Carson McCullers belong to this genre.

This subordination of verisimilitude to fantasy is apparent in the author's use of settings remote and distant which bespeak loneliness and despair as in Reflections in a Golden Eye and The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and in her introduction of such fanciful impish creatures as Anacleto, the frivolous Filipino houseboy in the former and Cousin Lymon, the mischievous hunchback in the latter. These works are further set apart from the tradition of realistic prose fiction by their distinctive use of figurative and imagistic language indigenous to poetry, focusing on such striking images as the enormous reflecting golden eye of the peacock, the source of the title of the first work, and the "two gray crossed eyes" of the reclusive Miss Amelia in the second.

The use of eyes is part of an emerging pattern of images of reflection which assumes symbolic import as the

introspective examination of the self in the eternal quest for self-knowledge. Consistent with this theme, other patterns of imagery, most notably those of the fallen house and the dark journey, arise. In these three symbolic patterns of the self, Mrs. McCullers relies heavily on the use of light and dark imagery (as with the half-painted house of Miss Amelia), a characteristic indicative of her Manichaeian tendency to view the quest for self-knowledge, and ultimately reality itself, in polar terms of good-evil, reason-passion, and body-soul.

This Manichaeian sensibility reveals a preoccupation with the darker side of man's nature, particularly as expressed in the myth of Eros or lawless passion. Her characters are consumed with romantic passion which expresses itself in a bizarre pattern of heterosexual and homoerotic relationships such as the ludicrous courtship of the manly giantess and the effeminate hunchback in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and the passionate devotion of one mute for another in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.

Leslie Fiedler points out that the American literary imagination has forged its own variant of the European Eros myth through the transformation of the heterosexual myth of the dark beloved into the homoerotic love of the white man for his dark comrade. The romance-novel has quite clearly inculcated the myth which is readily discernible in McCullers' Clock without Hands, in the love of Jester Clane, the

white scion of a Southern aristocrat, for Sherman Pew, the mulatto orphan.

Taken together, these romantic proclivities of Carson McCullers should be viewed, not as an attempt on the part of the writer to elude reality, but rather as an effort to confront it by delving below the surface.

## CHAPTER I

### IN SEARCH OF A TRADITION

In a comprehensive study of the novels of Carson McCullers, one of the most difficult, yet most essential tasks is to define the tradition to which her works belong. Because I believe it has not yet been adequately done, my purpose here is to attempt this definition through analysis of her works.<sup>1</sup> The burden of my argument is that Mrs. McCullers' outlook as a writer is essentially romantic and that her fiction belongs to the peculiar American romantic tradition identified and defined by Richard Chase in The American Novel and Its Tradition.

The objective of this introductory chapter is to re-examine the hybrid genre termed the romance-novel by Chase, noting its fundamental characteristics and demonstrating their general application to the novels of Mrs. McCullers. The latter half of the chapter will enlarge upon the Chase thesis by examining three motifs indigenous to the tradition of romance,

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<sup>1</sup> A number of comprehensive studies on Carson McCullers including Ihab Hassan's Radical Innocence, Oliver Evans' biography The Ballad of Carson McCullers, Chester Eisinger's Fiction of the Forties and Irvin Malin's New American Gothic imply an awareness of romantic tendencies without ever really confronting the burden of placing her in the romantic tradition. Malin comes closest when he includes her in his New American Gothic tradition which has its roots in American romanticism.

Platonic love, erotic love, and brotherly love, considering their origins and specific development in Mrs. McCullers' fiction. The groundwork will then be laid in this chapter for a subsequent in-depth analysis of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Reflections in a Golden Eye, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, The Member of the Wedding, and Clock without Hands.

While reading these novels, I was struck by the difficulty of identifying their genre. Although they met the standard novelistic criteria with regard to structure, they somehow fell short of my expectations. In place of the usual sanity and common sense, the expansiveness, and moral considerations that traditionally dominate the novel, there was evidence of a pervasive poetic sensibility, a decidedly lyrical style, and a highly colored, melodramatic imagination. Fortunately, Chase's book offered a sensible solution to the problem, for, in reading American novels, he too had been struck by the "freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the English novel."<sup>2</sup> In short, he recognized that the uniqueness of the American novel is that it strikes a literary compromise between two distinct genres, the romance and the novel; hence, he terms it the romance-novel.

At the outset of his study, he delineates the characteristics of this mixed genre, and it would be well to glance

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<sup>2</sup> The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. viii.

briefly at these criteria now. Fundamentally, there is a tendency to disregard the usual commitment to verisimilitude and to substitute in its place a kind of sustained prose melodrama heightened by a penchant for fantasy and myth where action defies the limits of external reality and takes precedence over character. This willingness on the part of the author to sacrifice realistic character development for freer action points up the preference for abstraction, and indeed many of the characters themselves become symbolic. Moreover, the American imagination has long been enthralled by the polarities of good and evil. Consequently, light and dark imagery and symbols abound in the literature, with the result that frequently there is a greater preoccupation with darkness and evil than with light and goodness.

This obsessive interest in darkness and evil countermands the traditional concern of the novelist for questions of social morality and precludes his role as arbiter in these matters. Because it sidesteps moral issues and problems in the conventional sense, the American romance-novel has less in common with the English novel based on society and morality and is instead more indebted to the French and Russian models. In addition to skirting the social issues, the American imagination explores the darker side of human nature in an attempt to discover man's capacity for evil. Not surprisingly, the protagonists in this type of fiction are typically alienated figures living on the fringes of society and frequently suffering from some sort of neurosis.



Thus far we have discussed the characteristics inherent in the romance-novel as outlined by Chase, but as yet no mention has been made of the peculiar cultural phenomenon to which he attributes this deviation from the traditional form of the novel. American culture is noted for its contradictions and disparities rather than its consistency and harmony, and the American literary imagination has been accordingly shaped so that it relies on tension, disunity, and disorder for the fabric of its fiction. Quite frequently the foundation of the romance-novel is a cohesion of tragedy and comedy.

Perhaps the greatest testimony of all to the contradictions and disparities which paradoxically bind the romance-novel is that it takes its impetus from poetry rather than prose. Chase contends that "American fiction has been notable for its poetic quality, which is not the poetry of verse nor yet the domestic or naturalistic poetry of the novel but the poetry of romance."<sup>3</sup> In this connection he views the alliance of romance with epic in the novels of William Gilmore Simms, but maintains that overall American fiction has incorporated the poetry of melodrama with its penchant for "tales of passion" and studies of the darker side of life in preference to that of the epic.

In the novels of Mrs. McCullers the characteristics indigenous to the romance-novel are not only present, they

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. vii-21. The general discussion of the romance-novel according to Chase covers the pages listed here and concludes at this point.

are pervasive. What is most apparent to the reader upon first encountering these novels is this marked tendency of the romance-novel to de-emphasize verisimilitude. On the first page, the reader is introduced to the very special world of Carson McCullers, a highly romantic and imaginative, and yet a highly probable, world within the context of the novel. It may be an isolated army post in peace time where the bizarre becomes commonplace, as in Reflections in a Golden Eye; or it may be the dreary lifeless town that awakens momentarily to the antics of a gnomish little hunchback as in The Ballad of the Sad Café. Regardless of the setting, the world presented here is clearly a creation of the artist's imagination, and we have Mrs. McCullers' own statements about her philosophy of writing to substantiate what is evident from the novels themselves. In a revealing essay entitled "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing" which appeared in Esquire in December 1959, she discusses the important distinction which must be made between external reality and the artist's vision of reality:

When I was nearly finished with The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, my husband mentioned that there was a convention of deaf mutes in a town near-by and he assumed that I would want to go and observe them. I told him that it was the last thing I wanted to do because I already had made my conception of deaf mutes and didn't want it to be disturbed. I presume James Joyce had the same attitude when he lived abroad and never visited his home again<sup>4</sup>, feeling his Dublin was fixed forever--which it is.

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<sup>4</sup> The Mortgaged Heart (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 313. This is an anthology of Mrs. McCullers' shorter pieces edited by her sister Margarita G. Smith. Many of these pieces previously appeared in magazines and will be so indicated.

A perusal of this essay alone is sufficient to convince any reader that her outlook as a writer is essentially romantic for she espouses one of the cardinal tenets of romanticism that intuition, not analytic thought, is the proper way of getting at truth. She repeatedly asserts that "the imagination is truer than reality."<sup>5</sup> Although she does not deny the validity of reality, she subordinates it to the imagination and finds it useful only when accompanied by the imagination:

It is only with imagination and reality that you get to know the things a novel requires. Reality alone has never been important to me. A teacher once said that one should write about one's own back yard; and by this, I suppose, she meant one should write about the things that one knows most intimately. But what is more intimate than one's own imagination? The imagination combines memory with insight, combines reality with the dream.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the emphasis which Mrs. McCullers places on intuition and imagination, two of the most salient concerns of romanticism, she further allies herself with romantic poets and critics of romantic poetry in her conception of a literary work of art as an organic whole:

It is like a flowering dream. Ideas grow, budding silently, and there are a thousand illuminations coming day by day as the work progresses. A seed grows in writing as in nature. The seed of the idea is developed by both labor and the unconscious, and the struggle that goes on between them.

Turning aside from this very useful essay which establishes Mrs. McCullers as a romantic in both criticism and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 319.      <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 311-12.

fiction, we should briefly consider the novels themselves in which she faithfully applies her philosophy of writing and in which the Chase criteria for the romance-novel are readily manifested. In place of the writer's commitment to verisimilitude and factual reality, she creates a fictive world in which sensational and melodramatic happenings seem probable and even commonplace. Invoking the skills and techniques of the dramatist, she conjures up memorable and striking scenes which leave indelible impressions on the mind of the reader. One such dramatic happening occurs in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter when young Bubber Kelly shoots sub-deb toddler Baby Wilson. An equally tense, but no less ludicrous scene takes place in The Member of the Wedding when twelve-year old Frankie, posing as the femme fatale, must escape from a drunken soldier in a sleazy hotel.

In addition to her flare for melodramatic scenes, Mrs. McCullers has a penchant for fantasy which she displays through the creation of such fanciful creatures as Anacleto, the monkeyish little Filipino houseboy in Reflections in a Golden Eye; Cousin Lymon, the effeminate little hunchback in The Ballad of the Sad Café; and most memorable of all, Spiros Antonapoulos, the obese Greek mute in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. The presence of such fabulous caricatures as Antonapoulos, Lymon, and Anacleto not only adds touches of the humorous and the grotesque but also gives evidence of an anti-realistic approach to fiction which relies heavily on mythic and legendary elements. In his discussion of The

Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Mark Schorer observes, "For all the realistic detail of the novel, it is at heart a parable that is suggested at once in the legendary style."<sup>8</sup> In discussing the opening sentence ("In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together."), he comments that "such fairy tale-like declarative sentences are the most frequently used throughout the book" because they supply "a tone appropriate to the retelling of an old myth, or to the attempted constructions of a new one."<sup>9</sup>

More important than the observations of any critic is Mrs. McCullers' own acknowledgement that she has relied on myth in the fabric of her fiction. In "The Flowering Dream" she explains that the romantic relationship between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon in The Ballad of the Sad Café is based on the Tristan-Isolde myth.<sup>10</sup> The acknowledged use of this particular myth is of paramount importance to the study of Mrs. McCullers as a romantic writer, and it will be considered in greater detail in the later discussion of erotic love.

In addition to the romantic myth of heterosexual passion, a careful examination of the novels reveals the pervasiveness of the Antinous myth of homosexual love. Leslie Fiedler points out in Love and Death in the American Novel that the Antinous myth, based on the attraction of the Em-

<sup>8</sup> The World We Imagine (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968), p. 278.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>10</sup> The Mortgaged Heart, p. 319.

peror Hadrian for the young boy Antinous, is the archetype of "innocent homosexuality" or "the love of comrades" and dominates much of American literature.<sup>11</sup> There are a number of such male pairs in the novels under consideration. In Reflections in a Golden Eye, we find the attraction of the older man to the young boy mimed in the passion of Captain Penderton for Private Williams. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, the relationship manifests itself in Singer's worship of Antonapoulos. Cousin Lymon pines away for love of Marvin Macy in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. And in Clock without Hands the myth assumes racial overtones in the boundless admiration of the white boy, Jester, for his black comrade, Sherman.

Besides the incorporation of mythic elements and analogues in her fiction, Mrs. McCullers exhibits a decided preference for the abstract and the symbolic, key elements in the romance-novel. The words parable and allegory invariably appear in critical discussions of her work and are often accompanied by observations of its gothic elements. Because she is a Southern writer, she is often lumped together with Faulkner and Truman Capote as one of the principal figures of the modern Gothic school of writing.

Irvin Malin and Chester Eisinger are particularly preoccupied with the neo-gothic elements that surface in her fiction. In his book New American Gothic Malin defines what

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<sup>11</sup> Rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), p. 348.

he calls the New American Gothic tradition and analyzes the works of a number of writers including Mrs. McCullers whom he places in this genre. In Fiction of the Forties, Eisinger attempts to account for the development of the symbolic and the gothic elements in American fiction which reaches its apex in the fiction of the forties, the decade which gave rise to Carson McCullers' works. Both he and Malin are heavily influenced by Chase. Eisinger's account readily reflects this influence and similarly credits Charles Brockden Brown's melodramatic fiction with the genesis of this tradition:

Strangely, given the nature of American culture . . . the gothic and symbolic have played a part in American fiction almost from the beginning. . . . Out of the quest for property on the frontier, for example, came the loneliness and terror of the gothic. Out of the Puritanism came the idealism which made a symbolic interpretation of experience thoroughly understandable. Critical opinion in recent years, in pointing out the distinction between the novel and the romance, has demonstrated that the romance as fiction is gothic and symbolic, antirealistic and melodramatic. It has insisted that most American fiction is written as parable and its real life is internal. It has shown how the power of blackness pervades much of nineteenth century<sup>12</sup> fiction. The forties is heir to this tradition.

The observation of Eisinger indicates that Mrs. McCullers' use of parable, allegory, and symbol is not unique as many critics would have us believe, but is instead firmly grounded in a long tradition of such anti-realistic literature. Consequently, many of the symbols she employs are fairly conventional or stock representations that have been

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<sup>12</sup> Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 15.

adapted to the exigencies of modern literature. In romantic and gothic literature, there is probably no symbol more popular than the house, particularly the fallen or decaying mansion, and Malin is quick to point out its pervasiveness as a modern variation of the haunted house or gothic castle in the New American Gothic fiction.<sup>13</sup> It is also one of the central symbols in The Ballad of the Sad Café, a poignant landmark of loneliness and isolation.

A possible derivative of the gloomy mansion, but one which stands in marked contrast to it, is the "clean well-lighted" cafe so reminiscent of the Hemingway stories which offers fellowship, solidarity, and a sense of communal identity. Chief among these community gathering spots are Biff Brannon's New York Café in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Miss Amelia's cafe in The Ballad of the Sad Café. But there are also variations on the symbolic cafe, such as the kitchen of the Addams house where Frankie, Berenice and John Henry hold endless quasi-philosophical discussions in The Member of the Wedding and the drugstore of J. T. Malone which features food and fellowship in Clock without Hands.

The abundance of symbols in the novels points up the writer's penchant for abstraction, and her use of the neo-gothic mansion strongly hints at her fascination with the shadowy, darker side of life, a trait which, as Dayton Kohler observes, distinguishes her as a literary descendent

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<sup>13</sup> New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 79.



of Hawthorne and Melville.<sup>14</sup> Chase notes the Manichaeian sensibility at work in the American literary imagination with its penchant for dichotomies and extreme polarities of good and evil, darkness and light, and points out that it is enhanced by the black-white racial composition of America.<sup>15</sup> Such dark-light imagery abounds in the fiction of Carson McCullers, and quite frequently it has a direct correlation to the race of the characters so that black and white characters come to embody particular abstractions such as passion or reason.

In dealing with the dichotomies of light-dark and good-evil without particular regard for questions of morality, Mrs. McCullers is working within the tradition of the Continental novel. Acknowledging the various influences on her writing in "The Flowering Dream," she singles out the Russians and Flaubert.<sup>16</sup> In discussing Southern writing, she points out the affinities between Russian and Southern writing and culture. In an essay entitled "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature," she laments the mislabeling of modern Southern writing as an outgrowth of the early 19th century Gothicists, and argues instead that it is the offspring of the Russian realists. Chief among the cultural affinities of Russia and the South, according to Mrs. McCul-

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<sup>14</sup> "Carson McCullers: Variations on a Theme," College English, 13 (October 1951), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> The American Novel, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> The Mortgaged Heart, p. 316.

lers, is the contempt for human life, an attitude which manifests itself in the persistent use of themes involving cruelty and suffering.<sup>17</sup>

As though to further underscore her point, Oliver Evans, her biographer, points out in his discussion of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter the Dostoevski doctrine that suffering "ennobles and redeems mankind" which is readily discernible in the agonies of Singer.<sup>18</sup> Her novels are peopled with characters who are self-pitying, masochistic types with a predisposition for suffering. Mrs. McCullers' own description of Dostoevski's Raskolnikov as "a symbol of the tragic inability of man to find an inward harmony with this world of disorder" is reminiscent of many of her own characters, particularly Dr. Copeland, Jake Blount, and J. T. Malone.

In noting the suffering and cruelty displayed in Russian and Southern writing, she is interested not only in the expression of these themes but in the technique used to present them, for here again she finds remarkable affinity. She describes the approach as "a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, and the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail."<sup>19</sup> Pursuing this notion, she continues, "Farce and tragedy have always been

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 285-92. "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature" first appeared in Decision, July 1941.

<sup>18</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> The Mortgaged Heart, p. 286.

used as foils for each other. But it is rare, except in the works of the Russians and the Southerners, that they are superimposed one upon the other so that their effects are experienced simultaneously."<sup>20</sup> What she has essentially described is a mixed attitude toward life which is both tragic and comic, a view that is of necessity fraught with disparity and contradiction. It is a vision by which the humorous becomes grotesque and conversely the grotesque, humorous. Fiedler enlarges upon her thesis, going beyond the scope of Southern writing to include all of American fiction which he believes thrives on the combined ingredients of horror and humor.<sup>21</sup> With this realization, we come to a clearer understanding of the peculiar characters that people the McCullers novels such as the queer little hunchback in The Ballad of the Sad Café who is at once cute and hideous, charming and repugnant.

Such grotesque figures in her fiction function as more than just products of this tragicomic vision; these human aberrations are the very incarnation of a civilization ridden with disease and decay. As Ihab Hassan argues in Radical Innocence, disease, decay and even death inform much of modern fiction, particularly that of Kafka, Mann and Dostoevski.<sup>22</sup> Hassan's statement immediately calls to mind Mann's Death in Venice with its depiction of a decadent, disease-

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 286-87.

<sup>21</sup> Love and Death in the American Novel, pp. 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 26.

ridden culture culminating in the fatal epidemic to which von Aschenbach willingly and deliberately succumbs. In place of von Aschenbach, Mrs. McCullers ironically gives us Benedict Mady Copeland, a tubercular doctor, and J. T. Malone, a dying druggist. The disease-ridden bodies of these men are outward signs indicative of their deeply troubled, infected souls, for they are victims of the malady which plagues modern man, the disease of extreme self-consciousness and solitariness.

The plight of modern man is a subject which has preoccupied the greatest minds of the 20th century. Psychologist Carl Jung's classic study, Modern Man in Search of a Soul, probes and analyzes with great sensitivity and objectivity the estrangement of modern man from his historical place in civilization:

The man whom we can with justice call "modern" is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from his original "participation mystique" with the mass of men--from submersion in a common unconsciousness. Every step forward means an act of tearing himself loose from that all-embracing pristine unconsciousness which claims the bulk of mankind almost entirely. . . . Thus he has become "unhistorical" in the deepest sense and has estranged himself from the mass of men who live entirely within the bounds of tradition. Indeed, he is completely modern only when he has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, and acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow.<sup>23</sup>

The troubled soul of modern man who suffers from lone-

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<sup>23</sup> (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1933), p. 197.

liness is a preoccupation not only with the psychologist but with the writer as well. Indeed it can be said that there is no more pervasive and popular theme in modern fiction than that of the alienated man. And if writers are obsessed with the theme, so are critics. Hassan's book which is devoted almost exclusively to a study of this theme views the modern protagonist as victim rather than hero. He comments that along with Huckleberry Finn, from which Hemingway claimed all American literature originated, one should add Dostoevski's Notes From Underground whose protagonist suffers from compulsive self-consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

The fiction of Mrs. McCullers is filled with such characters. There is scarcely a one who is not maladjusted or deformed or who does not suffer acutely from loneliness. The adolescent characters, Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams, suffer growing pains and experience the frustration of "not belonging." Dr. Copeland is isolated from his family and the Negro community because of his education and his austerity, but he is equally alien to the white community because of his race. John Singer is isolated as a result of his deformity, and Miss Amelia willfully alienates herself because of her innately selfish disposition and her brutal rejection in love.

The agonizing cry of these lonely, tortured souls is all the more heart-rending because of the stark, lyrical style evoked in the novels. There is scarcely a critic who

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<sup>24</sup> Radical Innocence, p. 24.

has failed to comment on the lyricism of her prose, and the story of how Mrs. McCullers began her career as a musician and by some quirk of fate became a writer is often used as an explanation for the musical quality of her prose and the musical structure of many of her novels, most notably The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and The Ballad of the Sad Café.<sup>25</sup> Even the writer herself is convinced of the vital relationship between the lyric and prose. She is insistent that "Good prose should be fused with the light of poetry; prose should be like poetry, poetry should make sense like prose."<sup>25</sup>

Chase, of course, speaks of the American novel as embodying the "poetry of romance," and Hassan's equivalent for the romance-novel is the poetic novel. As Hassan explains in his study, fiction not only descends from poetry, it aspires to poetry:

The lyrical cry is like love: it assumes a kind of exclusiveness. When the novel contracts into poetic form, it confesses its inability to share widely in the affairs of this world. The poetic novel is a paradoxical statement; it turns that failure of communication which is the shrill theme of our time into communicable form.<sup>26</sup>

This inability to communicate is the underlying theme in the novels of Carson McCullers, and it is concomitant with the search for love and recognition. As in all romantic writing, love in its various forms is the controlling motif in her fiction. But love is a stream which flows si-

<sup>25</sup> The Mortgaged Heart ("The Flowering Dream"), p. 315.

<sup>26</sup> Radical Innocence, p. 103.

multaneously in two opposite directions, towards and away from the self, and therein lies the paradox which is the cornerstone of her philosophy as a writer. In "The Flowering Dream" she writes, "Above all, love is the main generator of all good writing. Love, passion, compassion are all welded together."<sup>27</sup>

What we have in the novels under consideration is the interplay of three forms of love which are indigenous to 19th century romantic poetry, from which she seems to take much of her impetus; Platonic or spiritual love, erotic or passionate love, and Christian or brotherly love. Studies on Mrs. McCullers' use of Platonic love have by now become almost commonplace, although Frank Baldanza's essay, "Plato in Dixie," is a comprehensive, perceptive study on the subject. In his article, he comments that she is not a deliberate or conscious Platonist, but is rather a "natural Platonist" whose predisposition to Platonic thought is part of her Southern heritage.<sup>28</sup> Her characters reflect her own preoccupation with the nature of love, as the kitchen seminar on love between Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry aptly suggests in The Member of the Wedding. The discussion that occurs is in the form of a Socratic dialogue between the neophyte played by Frankie and the sage played by Berenice, and Baldanza points out that the substance of the discussion

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<sup>27</sup> The Mortgaged Heart, p. 319.

<sup>28</sup> Georgia Review, 12 (1958), pp. 153-54.

is reminiscent of the Symposium.<sup>29</sup> A similar dialogue takes place in one of her better-known short stories, "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud," in which a stranger discusses the science of love with a young boy. But the most frequently-quoted discourse on love is the one given by the writer herself in The Ballad of the Sad Café in which she explains the irrational nature of love and emphasizes the role of lover who tyrannizes the beloved.

Most of her ideas on love coincide with those found in the Phaedrus and parts of the Symposium, and it might be useful to briefly examine some of these ideas. The Phaedrus dialogue focuses on the lover who is seized with a divine madness, love. Hence love is inherently good, and the lover is divinely inspired. Lover and beloved are typically opposites, and the lover seeks to dominate. The yearning of the lover is such that he longs to take flight and escape his earthly bondage. Thus the death wish is implied. The lover adulates his beloved as though the latter were a god and shapes the beloved in his own image, with the result that the beloved becomes the ideal of the self.

The nature of love and the relationship between lover and beloved is further explored in the Symposium. Aristophanes' speech is particularly illuminating for our purposes. According to the myth he recounts, there was once a third sex comprised of a union of male and female which was punished by Zeus who split them in two. Thereafter each half-

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-62.



man sought his other half longing to be reunited as one. This yearning for reunion with one's other half is called love, and it too transcends the physical realm in search of spiritual union.

The kind of eternal quest for love, truth, and beauty in the abstract suggested in these Platonic works pervades much of romantic poetry and is reminiscent of Shelley's works, particularly "Alastor" and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." So that, in effect, while Mrs. McCullers' Platonism may be largely natural and uncultivated, it nevertheless places her in a direct line of descent from the 19th century romantic poets, a rather peculiar phenomenon for a contemporary American novelist.

Love, however, manifests itself in ways other than intellectual discussions and dialogues. Eros in the form of passionate or romantic love appears with great frequency throughout the novels, and a certain style and decorum are faithfully maintained which are consistent with the tradition of courtly love. Eros vis a vis courtly love has come to be epitomized in the story of Tristan and Isolde, a myth which has been immortalized in poetry and song, particularly in the 19th century. There is no more erudite scholar on the subject of erotic love and the courtly love tradition than Denis de Rougemont whose ideas have been both enthusiastically accepted and bitterly excoriated.<sup>30</sup> According to

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<sup>30</sup> Love in the Western World (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1956), p. 15. The following paragraphs contain a general discussion of erotic love covering pp. 15-56 and 240-49.

his study, Love in the Western World, the driving force behind the Tristan myth is adulterous passion or forbidden love. The dark nature of Tristan and Isolde's love is such that it harbors the death wish. Love, passion, and desire find consummation only in death. Moreover, Tristan and Isolde are not so much in love with one another as they are with the idea of being in love. Hence, separation rather than reunion fosters passion, as do suffering, obstructions, and other impediments to the romance. Moreover, their love is selfish, for they seek fulfillment of their own desires; in other words, their love is basically narcissistic.

In discussing religious origins of the myth, de Rougemont acknowledges the influence of Manichaeism, a gnostic religion which is basically dualistic. This inherent dualism resides in the myths of Night and Day, Darkness and Light, Body and Soul. Manichaeism posits that the Soul which is divine is imprisoned by the Body and yearns to take flight and to transcend its terrestrial confinement. Death is the only means of escape; thus, the Manichaean holds that death is the ultimate good. Because the Manichaean faith is basically irrational, having its primal expression in the mystical experience, it seeks to articulate the ineffable by lyrical means; hence, it is fertile ground for the poets.

And it is in poetry that the myth of Tristan and Isolde receives its finest expression. De Rougemont feels that in the poetry and music of Wagner's opera, Eros soars to sublime heights, for Wagner dwells on Darkness and the

yearning of the soul to transcend its earthly bondage. De Rougemont argues that only music can adequately convey this longing of Tristan and Isolde for spiritual oneness, a union that can be achieved only in death. Hence, the love duet which expresses this intense yearning for union has as its leitmotif death.

He deplores the popularization of the myth in 19th century novels such as Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Zola's Therese Raquin, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, and the Victorian novels, particularly Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, because he feels they have contributed greatly to its misunderstanding and subsequent degeneration in later literature. The focus in the popularized myth is on what de Rougemont refers to as the "eternal triangle" comprised of husband, wife and wife's lover. Similarly intrigued by the pattern, Fiedler terms it the "unnatural triangle" defining it as "two men . . . bound to each other through the woman they jointly possess, as they cannot . . . possess each other." He points out that although European in origin, the pattern pervades much of American fiction, the classic example of it being the Hester-Dimmesdale-Chillingworth ménage of The Scarlet Letter.<sup>31</sup>

Carson McCullers relies heavily on the scheme of the "unnatural triangle" in developing the love motifs of her fiction, and it is interesting to note that the earliest use of the "frustration pattern," for so it is called by her

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<sup>31</sup> Love and Death, p. 363.

biographer Oliver Evans, occurs in "Sucker," her first short story written at the age of seventeen.<sup>32</sup> The story is about adolescents and the hero-worship and puppy love they experience as a part of growing up. The pivotal figure is Pete, a teenager with a "king-size crush" on Maybelle, the high school "heartbreak kid." Meanwhile, Pete has a cousin, Sucker, who idolizes him in the same way that he idolizes Maybelle.

This same paradigm can be readily discerned in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter with the "group" (Mick, Biff, Jake, and Dr. Copeland), Singer, and Antonapoulos as the participants in the triangular affair; the "group" adulates Singer who worships Antonapoulos. It is clearly present in the homosexual attraction of Captain Penderton to Private Williams who is mesmerized by the sight of Captain Penderton's wife in Reflections in a Golden Eye. The roles are once again recast with children in The Member of the Wedding where John Henry, like Sucker, has a crush on his older cousin Frankie who idolizes her older brother and his bride-to-be. Still maintaining a cast of adolescents in Clock without Hands, the triangle takes shape with Jester, the white boy, who adulates Sherman, the black boy, who worships Zippo, the black "wheeler-dealer."

Although the persistent use of the "unnatural triangle" is sufficient evidence of the writer's predisposition toward romantic love in the popular sense, it is not enough

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<sup>32</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers, pp. 24-25.

to indicate Mrs. McCullers' intuitive understanding of what lies at the heart of the myth of Eros, the identification of love and passion with death. That she possesses this innate awareness in much the same way that she possesses an inherent understanding of Platonism is made manifestly clear in the novels which are filled with characters whose passion is wedded to a compelling desire for self-annihilation. Upon learning of the death of Antonapoulos, Singer goes home and shoots himself. The voyeuristic soldier in Reflections in a Golden Eye courts death each night that he trespasses on the Penderton property in order to gaze at the sleeping Leonora. Sherman Pew welcomes death into his own living room when he ignores the warning of Jester that enraged white citizens are about to bomb his house in Clock without Hands. Moreover, a number of her characters, particularly those who are prone to violence and destruction, rely on drugs which in themselves create a death-like stasis. Among the drug-users are Captain Penderton in Reflections in a Golden Eye, Marvin Macy in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, and Honey Brown in The Member of the Wedding.

Although quite frequently the novels seem to resolve themselves in violence and death, this resolution is usually accompanied by a more positive appeal to humanitarian instincts and stresses the need for a communal sense of identity. In "The Flowering Dream," Mrs. McCullers emphasizes the importance and meaning of this juxtaposition of Eros and Agape as it occurs in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: "The pas-

sionate individual love--the old Tristan-Isolde love, the Eros love--is inferior to the love of God, to fellowship, to the love of Agape--the Greek god of the feast, the God of brotherly love--and of man. This is what I tried to show in The Ballad of the Sad Café in the strange love of Miss Amelia for the little hunchback, Cousin Lymon."<sup>33</sup>

The Agape of which she speaks has of course come to be acknowledged as Christian love or brotherly love because it is love without sexual motive or desire for conquest as in the case of Eros. It is unselfish love as opposed to Eros which is selfish love, and is directed outward to others rather than inward toward the self. In contrast with Eros which aims toward flight and ultimately death, Agape posits endurance and seeks rebirth through salvation. While Eros eludes reality through idealization and aspires to the state of becoming, Agape is grounded in reality, defined in terms of the now and the present. Agape is oriented to the other rather than the self, while in Eros the lover overshadows the beloved or other. The virtues identified with Agape are surrender, self-sacrifice, responsibility, and commitment to others.<sup>34</sup>

Agape is epitomized by the communal spirit, fellowship, or group activity--in short, the image of group-man as

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<sup>33</sup> The Mortgaged Heart, p. 319. I am unable to account for Mrs. McCullers' reference to Agape as a Greek god.

<sup>34</sup> M. C. D'Arcy, The Mind and Heart of Love (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956). The discussion of Agape and its differentiation is based on this study.

opposed to solitary man. Not surprisingly, group gatherings play an important role in the McCullers novels, and some of these have already been alluded to in the earlier part of this chapter. Cafe and cafe-like settings are prominent in the novels, most notably Biff Brannon's and Miss Amelia's. The Addams' kitchen and J. T. Malone's drugstore also come under this heading.

In this context, the family unit itself assumes an overriding importance in that the individual's desires and aspirations are subordinated to the greater needs of the family as a whole. The most effective illustration of this occurs in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter with the Kelly family. Mick, the youngest daughter, is forced to choose between the pursuit of her own musical aspirations and the need to help support her impoverished family. She temporarily abandons her music in order to quit school and earn money for her family.

The most powerful image of human solidarity in all McCullers' fiction, however, is that of the chain gang which appears at the conclusion of The Ballad of the Sad Café. The image of the twelve prisoners, black and white, with voices raised in song offers the promise of salvation through endurance in stark contrast to the image of the fallen house into which Miss Amelia retires, the symbol of loneliness, isolation, and unrequited love.

The function of the group, however, is often ambiguous, for it is equally capable of malevolence, thereby ne-

cessitating individual action which distinguishes one from a particular group and at the same time reaffirms one's alliance with the larger community of mankind. Such a situation arises in Clock without Hands when J. T. Malone is appointed by his white fellow townsmen as the murderer of Sherman Pew. Concerned with the salvation of his soul, he refuses and is scorned by the white bigots. But his act of choosing not to harm another human being is a positive one, for it asserts his essential humanity and is a true act of brotherly love.

This humane concern for the sanctity of all living creatures which persists throughout McCullers' fiction is once again an expression akin to 19th century poetic sentiment, particularly that of the romantic poets. The willingness to sacrifice oneself for the good of humanity is reminiscent of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound. And the science of love advocated and practiced by the stranger in "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud," who has learned to love and respect all of God's creatures cannot help but remind us of the message which Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* imparts to the wedding-guest: "He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small."

Mrs. McCullers' reliance on the three motifs of love, Platonic, erotic, and humanitarian, places her squarely in a line of descent from 19th century romantic writing and distinguishes her as a novelist with decided poetic sensibilities. Those sensibilities are further demonstrated in the lyrical quality of her prose in which she adopts a tone ap-



propriate to the telling of a tale or romance. But it is most clearly in her predilection for symbol and abstraction, which plays itself out in Manichaeian dualities, as well as her penchant for myth and fantasy that she reveals herself as a romantic.

In subsequent chapters we will examine each of her novels with an eye toward the romantic qualities discussed in this introductory chapter. The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter will be analyzed with regard to the interplay of Eros and Agape. Reflections in a Golden Eye will be studied as a novel dealing wholly with abstractions normally associated with romantic poetry. Motifs of Platonic and erotic love, particularly with regard to the decorum of courtly love, will be considered in the analysis of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The chapter dealing with The Member of the Wedding will consider the child as symbol of innocence, and the final chapter on Clock without Hands will view the novel as a manifestation of romantic sensibilities that are peculiarly Southern.

## CHAPTER II

### EROS AND AGAPE IN THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER:

#### TRANSCENDENCE OR SALVATION?

With the publication of her first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, in 1940, Mrs. McCullers was catapulted from obscurity to instant fame at the age of 23. The novel was greeted enthusiastically by reviewers and critics who marveled at the sensitivity and awareness of one so young and relatively inexperienced in the literary world. But perhaps the greatest testimony of all to the success of the novel was the effusive praise it elicited from Richard Wright who reviewed it for the New Republic:

To me the most impressive aspect of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Miss McCullers to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness. In the conventional sense, this is not so much a novel as a projected mood, an attitude externalized in naturalistic detail.<sup>1</sup>

Wright's perceptive review substantiates the contention of this study that despite the realistic trappings of the small Southern town, the novel itself is wholly con-

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<sup>1</sup> Review, 5 August 1940, p. 195.

cerned with abstractions externalized by the use of symbols in a conventional setting. In pointing out the essential humanity of the writer, he hints at the theme of love which unfolds in the novel on two distinct levels: selfish love and unselfish love, Eros and Agape.

The novel then is about the search for love, the need to give love, and the need to receive love. In her early outline of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, which was originally entitled The Mute, Mrs. McCullers describes the novel as " . . . the story of five isolated, lonely people in their search for expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves."<sup>2</sup> Despite its objective style, the story unfolds in a humane and compassionate way as the writer gently, but thoroughly, probes the innermost depths of the human relationships formed by these five lonely people whose lives become intertwined. This analysis will proceed according to the way in which the novel is structured, that is, in terms of the various human relationships presented and the kinds of love which come to dominate these relationships, whether it be Eros or Agape or both.

The structure of the novel can be viewed in two different ways as suggested by statements made in the story itself. The most apparent and most striking form which comes to the mind of the reader (and the one most often used by critics in analyzing the novel) is that of a wheel with

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<sup>2</sup> The Mortgaged Heart (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 142.

Singer as the symbolic hub while Blount, Brannon, Mick, and Dr. Copeland form the representative spokes. This is, in fact, the metaphor chosen by Mrs. McCullers to describe the relationship of the four to Singer: "Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel lead to the center hub."<sup>3</sup> Although this metaphor is at first glance quite effective in its description of the relationship of the four to Singer, it is really incomplete with reference to the structure of the novel as a whole because it excludes what may well be the most central character in the story, Antonapoulos the Greek mute, who is the lodestar, the guiding light of Singer's very being. A key passage explaining this more comprehensive structure of relationships is the description of Singer's foreboding dream in which he envisions a naked Antonapoulos kneeling at the top of a flight of steps in veneration of some mysterious object above him. Below Antonapoulos kneels Singer himself, also naked, gazing worshipfully at Antonapoulos and the strange object. Behind him are the other four nakedly kneeling with their eyes adoringly on Singer.

Thus the entire set of relationships takes its impetus, however indirectly, from Antonapoulos and from the mysterious object which hovers above him. It follows that an analysis of the novel which proceeds according to structure should begin at the very core of the story with Antonapoulos himself

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<sup>3</sup> The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 180. Subsequent passages cited within chapter by page number.

and his relationship to Singer. Their relationship becomes the central paradigm which all other relationships in the novel tend to mime, a fact which is accounted for as part of the original design of the novel in the outline of The Mute: "This situation between the four people and the mute has an almost exact parallel in the relationship between Singer and his deaf-mute friend, Antonapoulos."<sup>4</sup>

Antonapoulos stands in relationship to Singer as beloved stands to lover--as Isolde stands to Tristan. As David Madden has observed, Singer is a latent homosexual.<sup>5</sup> But while his relationship with Antonapoulos is completely dominated by Eros, there is a conspicuous absence of overt sexuality, just as the Tristan-Isolde love transcends mere physical limitations of earthly sexual desire and yearns instead for consummation in mutual death.

In order to fathom the complex and bizarre relationship that binds Singer to Antonapoulos, one must begin with a description of two completely opposite personalities, a characteristic of erotic love pointed out by Aristophanes in the Symposium and alluded to earlier in the general discussion of erotic and Platonic love. Despite their shared handicap, the two mutes do not remotely resemble one another in either appearance or behavior. Singer is thin, cerebral and Spartan; Antonapoulos is obese, imbecilic and sensual.

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<sup>4</sup> The Mortgaged Heart, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup> "The Paradox of the Need for Privacy and the Need for Understanding in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," Literature and Psychology, 17 (1967), p. 130.

Even the furnishings of their shared room tend to point up the basic contrasts inherent in their natures. For Singer there are straight-backed chairs and an iron cot, while Antonapoulos enjoys an overstuffed sofa and a large soft double-bed. Their interests and pastimes likewise provide a vivid contrast. As the complete sensualist, Antonapoulos has a passion for food, drink and masturbation.

On the other hand, Singer's interests tend to be more of the quasi-intellectual sort. He reads popular mysteries, occasionally takes in a movie, and enjoys playing chess. Unfortunately, he has only the simple-minded Antonapoulos for a partner, whose sole motivation is the bottle Singer keeps under the table to reward him for his paltry efforts. The game of chess, however, functions as a major symbol in illustrating the relationship of the two mutes. The black and white pawns function as part of the light/dark motif which is so essential to a proper understanding of their relationship. Antonapoulos immediately identifies himself with the white pieces, refusing even to play if the black men are given him. Moreover, he delights in the destruction of the black king. Thus Singer is identified with the black pieces, with their eventual destruction and ultimately with death itself.

It might be well here to re-examine Love in the Western World and de Rougemont's explanation of the Celtic myth of Day and Night which was eventually syncretized into the mythology of Manichaeism. In the myth Light is identified

with both Woman and the Soul: "Thus the yearning for Light was symbolized by the nocturnal attraction of sex. In the eyes of the flesh, uncreated broad Day was but Night, even as our day corresponded for the god dwelling beyond the stars to the realm of Dispater, the Father of Shadows."<sup>6</sup> In terms of the Celtic myth, Singer becomes representative of the eternal male lover identified with Night and the Body, while Antonapoulos as beloved stands for eternal Woman, Light and the Soul. What we have in effect is the androgynous personality, the male and female components of the dichotomous self as depicted by the half-selves, Singer and Antonapoulos. In contemplating his life with Antonapoulos, Singer thinks of the two in terms of an eternal union: "And this submerged communion with Antonapoulos had grown and changed as though they were together in the flesh. . . . And in his waking thoughts they were eternally united" (p. 276). A life without his beloved friend is inconceivable to Singer because it would be a life without an essential part of himself, his very soul.

But Singer's passionate devotion for the corpulent Greek is not restricted solely to analysis in terms of allegorical abstraction. The relationship is admirably suited to delineation in terms of courtly love, particularly with regard to the decorum involved in wooing of the beloved. Singer worships and fawns over Antonapoulos, while the be-

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<sup>6</sup> (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1956), pp. 66-67.

loved Greek's low esteem for his friend ranges from mere indifference to contempt and disdain. Singer's principal joy in life is pleasing Antonapoulos, and he goes to astonishing lengths to secure the Greek's favor. He lavishes gifts on his beloved which include rich, colorful garments and even a movie projector with comic film clips, but most of all he plies the Greek with palatable delicacies, knowing that above all food gratifies him the most.

Aside from the bestowal of gifts by the lover on his beloved, the decorum of courtly love requires that distance be maintained between lover and beloved so that trysts and partings evoke the principal form of passionate longing on the part of the lover. In addition, the distance provides a suitable obstruction comparable to the sword placed between Tristan and Isolde as they lie together, and it further necessitates the writing of secret letters to the beloved expressing passionate desire. For all of the above reasons, the separation of Antonapoulos and Singer is of paramount importance. The trips Singer makes to visit Antonapoulos in the asylum are not only his major preoccupation, involving such important matters as the selection of gifts for the Greek, they are also the source of his numerous anticipatory dreams and fantasies in which he and Antonapoulos are eternally united.

Aside from these fantasies, Singer is preoccupied with writing letters which are never mailed to the imbecilic Greek who cannot read. In these love letters Singer pours forth



his passionate yearning to be reunited with Antonapoulos in words that bespeak anguish and despair: "It has been five months and twenty-one days now. All of that time I have been alone without you. The only thing I can imagine is when I will be with you again. If I cannot come to you soon I do not know what" (p. 184). In another letter he finds the Greek's absence overwhelming: "I long for the food you used to make. . . . The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear. Soon I will come again. My vacation is not due for six months more but I think I can arrange it before then. I think I will have to. I am not meant to be alone and without you who understand" (p. 185).

Aside from the letters themselves which indicate the urgent need of Singer to communicate his feeling for Antonapoulos, the language generally used to describe the relationship of the two mutes is couched in terms frequently used to express erotic love. Such words as want ("the want for Antonapoulos," p. 173), long ("I long for the food you used to make," p. 184), and surrender ("He surrendered himself wholly to thoughts of his friend," p. 276) are typical expressions of Singer's feeling for Antonapoulos, and indicate the struggle and yearning characteristic of erotic love as explained in both Plato and the courtly love tradition. At one point a reference is even made to Singer's "buried life with Antonapoulos" (p. 170), a phrase which connotes the secrecy as well as the forbidden nature of this bizarre love affair.

In order to fully comprehend Singer's all-consuming

love for Antonapoulos, we must hearken back to the explanation of erotic love in Plato's Phaedrus where Socrates notes the tendency of the lover to reshape the beloved into the image of the god he venerates, a characteristic particularly applicable to Singer. In his dreams and memories, he conjures up a god-like vision of Antonapoulos as all wise, all-knowing and all good: "He saw Antonapoulos sitting in a large chair before him. He sat tranquil and unmoving. His round face was inscrutable. His mouth was wise and smiling. And his eyes were profound. He watched the things that were said to him. And in his wisdom he understood" (p. 173).

When Singer visits the Greek in the asylum infirmary, he envisions the listless imbecile, who is flamboyantly arrayed, as some kind of benevolent deity or king, holding court in the center of the ward:

His bed was placed in the middle of the room and he was sitting propped with pillows. He wore a scarlet dressing-gown and green silk pajamas and a turquoise ring. His skin was a pale yellow color, his eyes very dreamy and dark. His black hair was touched at the temples with silver. He was knitting. His fat fingers worked with the long ivory needles very slowly. At first he did not see his friend. Then when Singer stood before him he smiled serenely, without surprise, and held out his jeweled hand."  
(p. 187)

Even his condescending gesture of thanks to the nurse for straightening out his bed covers is transformed in the eyes of Singer to one of benediction. Antonapoulos disinterestedly watches Singer as his hands form the meanings he wishes to communicate to the Greek. Again Singer is struck by the dignity and composure of his beloved friend: "Sitting mo-

tionless in his bright, rich garments he seemed like some wise king from a legend" (p. 190).

But Singer's idolatry of his beloved Antonapoulos, while it is carried to the point of absurdity, can scarcely rival the high esteem in which the corpulent Greek holds himself, for he is selfishness and vanity incarnate. He is the complete narcissist, totally wrapped up in himself and his insatiable appetites to the exclusion of all else. Aside from his desire for self-gratification through eating, drinking and masturbating, his child-like craving for pictures of himself is pointedly narcissistic. Moreover, he has a craving for images that depict him romantically rather than realistically--not as he is, middle-aged and unattractive, but as he envisions himself, young and handsome.

Antonapoulos's worship of icons of the idealized self in effect makes him also a lover, and since he reshapes the images of himself to reflect youth and beauty, it is these two abstractions, youth and beauty, which he ultimately worships. Thus the enigmatic dream of Singer becomes clearer, for the mysterious object which Antonapoulos worships can be explained away as an icon of the ideal self epitomizing youth and beauty. The case of Antonapoulos has affinities with Aschenbach in Mann's Death in Venice, for what the artist Aschenbach seeks is a living icon of the self epitomizing youth and beauty in the figure of the young boy, Tadzio.

But we must remember that the true lover is in search

of abstraction or ideal and can only achieve transcendence through death. Similarly in the case of Antonapoulos, his love affair with the ideal self finds its ultimate resolution in death. But while death may seem a proper outcome for Antonapoulos's romance with the self, it spells tragedy for the grieving Singer who is left behind. In the Tristan-Isolde legend, mutual death is the eventual outcome, and so it is with the Singer-Antonapoulos romance. Unable to endure life without his beloved Antonapoulos, Singer kills himself.

Singer's death forms the climax of the novel, and the circumstances surrounding his suicide, as well as events leading up to it, are worthy of our attention. The initial reaction to Antonapoulos's death is very curious indeed. Singer, who is normally restrained, undergoes a complete personality transformation and is moved to a fit of violent rage upon learning of his beloved's death. He becomes emotionally upset and angry in his hotel over the loss of a nickel in the slot machine, which he would not have even played under normal circumstances. Ordinarily a scrupulously honest person, he pilfers "three towels, two cakes of soap, a pen and a bottle of ink, a roll of toilet paper, and a Holy Bible" (p. 278) as he leaves the hotel. Finally he goes home and puts a bullet through his chest. The irrational behavior of Singer is reminiscent of the behavior which Socrates ascribes to the injured lovers who are followers of Ares in the Phaedrus dialogue; in contrast to the followers

of Zeus who behave with wisdom and authority in love, the followers of Ares respond violently when injured in love even to the point of sacrificing themselves.

The premonition of death is even more strikingly discernible in the descriptive action which takes place on Singer's journey home. While on the train, he opens the crate of strawberries which had originally been intended for Antonapoulos:

When he was settled he opened the crate of strawberries and picked them over with finicky care. The berries were of a giant size, large as walnuts and in full-blown ripeness. The green leaves at the top of the rich-colored fruit were like tiny bouquets. Singer put a berry in his mouth and though the juice had a lush, wild sweetness there was already a subtle flavor of decay. He ate until his palate was dulled by the taste and then rewrapped the crate and placed it on the rack above him. At midnight he drew the window-shade and lay down on the seat. He was curled in a ball, his coat pulled over his face and head.  
(p. 279)

If this passage which exudes decadence has a vaguely familiar ring to the discerning reader, it is with good reason, because it is remarkably similar in substance and tone to Mann's famous passage in Death in Venice in which he describes Aschenbach's fatal gesture:

A vendor came by with strawberries, and Aschenbach made his second breakfast of the great luscious, dead-ripe fruit. It had grown very warm, although the sun had not availed to pierce the heavy layer of mist. His mind felt relaxed, his senses revelled in this vast, and soothing communion with the silence of the sea.

Not only do these two passages similarly describe the fatal gesture of eating over-ripe strawberries (though it is

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<sup>7</sup> (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), p. 33.

only a portent of death in Singer's case), they likewise include the fatal gesture of symbolic withdrawal. Singer curls up in a ball-like fetal position indicative of the "return to the womb," and Aschenbach revels in communion with the sea, traditionally a symbol of the womb. One can only conclude from these two similar passages that Hassan's observation that "disease and even death become an ultimate response to life"<sup>8</sup> in Mann's fiction is equally applicable to Carson McCullers' fiction.

The comparison between Death in Venice and The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is illuminating for other reasons, particularly in examining the mythic context of the Singer-Antonapoulos relationship. Quite clearly the Antinous<sup>9</sup> myth of pederasty underlies the romance of the two mutes as well as that of Aschenbach and Tadzio. It is so obvious in Mann's story that it requires no explanation: Aschenbach, an older man, is in love with Tadzio, the beautiful young boy. It requires more explanation in the McCullers novel because certain adjustments have been made. Although both mutes are the same age, it is Singer who behaves in adult-like fashion while Antonapoulos behaves with the fretful petulance of a school boy. And the remarkable similarity between the two names, Antonapoulos and Antinous<sup>9</sup>, coupled with the fact that Antonapoulos happens to be a Greek, can hardly escape the attention of the reader.

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<sup>8</sup> Radical Innocence (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 26.

As a Greek, Antonapoulos provides an interesting contrast with Singer, whom most critics have come to regard as something of a Christ figure. In ascribing mythic origins to Singer, Eisinger takes a somewhat different approach. He attributes to Singer hermaphroditic, albeit Christian, qualities and sees in him the dual embodiment of the "false Virgin" and the "false Son."<sup>9</sup> Although his death appears to have all the trappings of redemption, it is an act of selfishness, motivated by Eros not Agape. But this is not to say that Singer is incapable of generous and unselfish acts motivated by Agape. At all times he is polite, thoughtful, understanding and sympathetic to Mick, Blount, Copeland and Brannon; and it is for this very reason that they tend to regard him as both god and savior. He offers Jake a temporary home until he can recover from his alcoholic stupor. He comforts Dr. Copeland who is disconsolate over the tragedy that befalls his son Willy, and even rescues him when he is unjustly incarcerated. And he provides Mick with both a sanctuary in the form of his room and a radio, allowing her to indulge her passion for music.

This dualistic view of Singer as a figure who embodies both Eros and Agape is a very useful one, for in the course of the novel we become acquainted with the inner and outer personalities of the mute. In his relationship with Antonapoulos as lover, he appears a weak, agitated, tormented soul.

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<sup>9</sup> Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 247.

But we must also view him in relationship to the four to whom he becomes the beloved object of veneration. His outer self which manifests itself to them is something entirely different, for he appears composed, strong and silent. Evans compares Singer to Robinson's Richard Cory; and the comparison is a very perceptive one.<sup>10</sup> Their outward appearances are similar; both are "imperially slim." There is about them a quiet, reserved demeanor. Both are the subject of much speculation, admiration and even envy. Yet, inside, both are tormented souls, and while Richard Cory calmly puts a bullet through his head, John Singer puts one through his chest.

The aura of mystery surrounding Richard Cory similarly encircles John Singer. His mysterious origin is the subject of much small town speculation and gossip. Moreover, it conveniently enables those whose lives he touches to mold and shape him into their own special idol. Dr. Copeland sees in him a remarkable resemblance to Spinoza, his hero, as well as an ally of the oppressed minority, and is convinced that he must either be a Jew or a Northerner. Jake argues against this thesis and instead contends that he must be representative of the proletariat masses--a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Irish.

As Biff Brannon astutely observes, the other characters tend to make of Singer a homemade God, especially Mick

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<sup>10</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), p. 40.



Kelly. In her prayers she conjures up God in the form of Mr. Singer wrapped in a long white sheet. Like God, Mr. Singer is silent, and when she prays she utters the words as though she were addressing the mute.

Mick's love for Mr. Singer is a mixture of adolescent puppy love and hero worship. She stands in complete awe of him and follows him around like a stray dog in much the same way that he trails Antonapoulos. As Mrs. McCullers describes it, her love for him is boundless, even surpassing the love she has for her family, for it is a different type of love. It is indeed different because it is not filial love, but romantic or erotic love. She douses herself with perfume in hopes that it will attract his attention and please him. She even attempts to reshape herself in the image of her beloved Singer by adopting his habits. She places her toothbrush in a glass exactly as he does and quits eating cabbage when she learns that he dislikes it. And just as Singer fantasizes about his "buried life with Antonapoulos," so too does she indulge in dreams of spiritual union with Singer.

Yet another dimension is added to Mick's character by her creative aspirations. She is the archetypal artist-lover, the eternal quester in search of self-discovery much in the tradition of Stephen Dedalus and Quentin Compson. So enormous is her creative potential that she is depicted as an inventor, an artist, and a musician; she is indeed a wunderkind. With her newly acquired mechanical skills, she attempts to make her own violin. In the free art class, she

draws a number of pictures depicting nightmarish scenes of violence, a poignant testimony to the fact that, like Dedalus and Quentin, she too seeks escape from the nightmare of history that engulfs her. The most cherished of her talents, however, is her passion for music which is forever churning away in her brain, waiting to be put down on paper. More so than Quentin or Dedalus, Mick comes to symbolize the trapped or repressed artist, for while Quentin commits suicide and Dedalus flees Ireland, Mick is forced to reckon with the stifling reality of poverty which threatens to still her creativity.

Despite economic hardships which necessitate Mick's quitting school to get a job, the restless and creative urge churning within her will not be quelled. Though just an adolescent, she is an intense person in search of fulfillment conjunctively through creativity and love, goals which for her are indistinguishable. Like the wayfaring stranger in "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud," she studies and practices love as though it were an art or science, concentrating on first one object then another, culminating with her love for Mr. Singer. As a child her love is concentrated on a little girl in school named Celeste. Later she lavishes her affection on her younger brother Bubber to an almost incestuous degree, but the intense longing and want for love remain unfulfilled.

The desperation of her yearning is evident in the dramatic monologues which provide valuable insights into

Mick's inner being: "Maybe when people longed for a thing that had the longing made them trust in anything that might give it to them" (p. 43). The ever-increasing tension and yearning within Mick becomes obsessive: "The feeling was a whole lot worse than being hungry for any dinner, yet it was like that. I want--I want--I want--was all that she could think about--but just what this real want was she did not know" (p. 44). The hunger which she refers to here finds outward manifestation in the persistent physical hunger which gnaws away at Mick as the ravages of poverty overwhelm the Kelly family.

In light of Mick's intense yearning for and capacity to love, Portia's judgement of her seems short-sighted, overly critical and highly ironic. At one point she chastises Mick: "'You going to traipse all around like you haves to find something lost. You going to work yourself up with excitement. Your heart going to beat hard enough to kill you because you don't love and don't have peace. And then some day you going to bust loose and be ruined'" (p. 43). Of course, Portia is accurate in her recognition of the restless yearning in Mick, but she is completely unaware of the role Mick plays as tormented and anguished lover ever in search of an object on which to bestow the love which wells inside her like a raging tide. After Portia scolds her, Mick sadly retreats to her room and wonders, "What would Portia say if she knew that always there had been one person after another? And every time it was like some part of her would

bust in a hundred pieces?' " (p. 44).

Aside from the questing artist-lover, the character of Mick Kelly conforms quite readily to a number of archetypes and myths. As a mischievous tomboy, she is the quintessential American adolescent in the tradition of Huck Finn, a very popular figure in the fiction of the forties, as Eisinger observes.<sup>11</sup> In the best tradition of the Bildungsroman, she must undergo a ritualistic initiation, which, in this case, unfolds in stages climaxing with the loss of her virginity. The first step is the prom party she hosts, and at which she momentarily reverts to her childish ways by carousing for the last time with the younger neighborhood kids. After the party, she solemnly vows never to wear shorts again. The second step is her sexual initiation with Harry Minowitz. Jack Moore has commented that this mythic initiation in the woods has its analogue in the Hawthorne romance, comparing it with the initiation of Young Goodman Brown whose experience with the Black Mass and the unholy basin of blood in the forest is erotically translated.<sup>12</sup>

Although the loss of Mick's virginity is the most dramatic step of her initiation, it is not the final step. Her gradual initiation concludes with the movement toward adulthood and responsibility, from selfish love to selfless love, from Eros to Agape. This occurs when she makes the

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<sup>11</sup> Fiction of the Forties, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> "Carson McCullers: The Heart Is a Timeless Hunter," Twentieth Century Literature, XI, No. 2 (July 1965), p. 80.

decision to forego, at least temporarily, her own creative aspirations in order to help support her family.

After her initiation, Mick becomes a woman with serious responsibilities, and in that role she loses her former charm and appeal as tomboy, at least to Biff Brannon, whose pederfiliast affection for Mick is dissipated by the assumption of her new role. For Biff adheres strongly to the philosophy of Aristophanes and Jung that "By nature all people are of both sexes" (p. 112). What he finds so attractive about Mick is that in her tomboyish adolescence she does indeed appear to embody both sexes. Nor is she the only character emblematic of the androgynous personality. As Chester Eisinger observes, this sexual dichotomy is not only embodied in Mick, but in Singer and Brannon himself; however, the sexes achieve "a beneficent union" in the latter two, while "they make for a chaotic confusion" in Mick.<sup>13</sup>

But of the three characters, it is Biff Brannon whose dualistic psyche is most dramatically and emphatically developed in the novel, and it is Biff who represents the most harmonious balance of the sexes. As the self-styled cafe philosopher and student of human nature, he is the only one with sufficient self-awareness to sense the androgynous shape of his personality. Eisinger says of him: "But when he writes male logic and female intuition in his hermaphroditic soul, he emerges as at the end of the book, in the most favorable position of any of the characters. He com-

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<sup>13</sup> Fiction of the Forties, p. 250.

bines defeat and hope, he is at once the past and the future, he is suspended between radiance and darkness, between irony and faith."<sup>14</sup>

In addition to his being the sanest and most balanced of the characters, Brannon is the only one who stands aloof from Singer, despite his fascination with the mute, and he is the only one who attempts to view him objectively. Rather than make a god of Singer by disguising him according to his own whims and desires as the others try to do, he attempts to delve below the surface to discover the hidden side of Singer's personality, and he very nearly succeeds when he establishes the crucial link between Singer and Antonapoulos. In the arena of relationships revolving around Singer, he is more the spectator than the participant.

But Brannon's aloof detachment does not render him incapable of feeling. Although not emotional in the usual sense, he is sensitive and compassionate. He is kind-hearted and charitable, particularly to maimed people, freaks and the generally downtrodden. It is this very trait which attracts him to Singer in the first place, and it is also what prompts him to act on Jake Blount's behalf.

Aside from this Agape which he so keenly demonstrates, he is equally capable of erotic love, as his pederfiliast proclivities readily show. The object of his secret affections is Mick Kelly who is a steady customer at his New York Cafe. Each day he eagerly anticipates her appearance and is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

sadly disappointed if she fails to show. The mere mention of her name is enough to make him blush, and he goes out of his way to inquire about her from her classmates who patronize the cafe. His desire to give of himself to the unsuspecting Mick is very intense, but as this kind of love is strictly taboo, he sublimates his desire by giving to her in what is a more commercially acceptable way. Without her knowledge, he reduces the price of everything she orders, curbing his overwhelming impulse to simply give Mick anything she desires free of charge.

Thus the relationship between the lover Brannon and the oblivious beloved Mick represents another variation of the Tristan-Isolde pattern of courtly love. A more contemporary parallel of the Mick-Brannon relationship is the one set up by Nabokov between the lovely nymphette Lolita and the aging professor Humbert Humbert. While Biff's love for Mick can in no way be termed adulterous, finding no sexual consummation as in the Lolita-Humbert affair, it is nevertheless a forbidden love, a fact which, as in courtly love, adds to its appeal, while at the same time causes pangs of remorse and guilt on the part of Brannon:

Always he wanted to set her up to something, to give to her. And not only a sundae or some sweet to eat--but something real. That was all he wanted for himself--to give to her. Biff's mouth hardened. He had done nothing wrong but in him he felt a strange guilt. Why? The dark guilt in all men, unreckoned and without a name. (p. 199)

Biff's love for Mick, however, is only one aspect of his complex emotional make-up. Part of his attraction for

her can be explained in terms of Biff's predisposition toward the maternal role. At times he rhapsodizes about having two children of his own, one of whom would be like Mick or Baby Wilson, his niece. He exhibits as much, if not more, maternal concern for Baby than does Lucille, her mother, who readily acknowledges that Biff would make an ideal mother. He advises Lucille on how to best care for Baby and even helps to dress her by performing such motherly gestures as tying the sash on her dainty frocks.

But his effeminacy goes beyond his maternal concern for Baby. He maintains an avid interest in the domestic arts and is a meticulous housekeeper. As a child he played with dolls which were made from his mother's hairpins, an interesting manifestation of oedipal tendencies, especially when coupled with the fact that he wears his mother's wedding band and dotes on her memory. After the death of his wife, Biff's feminine mannerisms are multiplied. His first domestic task after Alice's death is to sew mourning bands on his clothing, a job which he performs skillfully and with relish, partly the result of his fascination with fabrics and their textures. Later he adopts Alice's tastes and habits, using her lemon rinse in his hair and dousing his body with her perfume.

The use of Alice's perfume does more than merely satisfy his feminine instincts. The smell titillates his senses launching him back into associations of his past in a very Proustian way:



But often he would uncork the bottle of Agua Florida and touch the stopper to the lobes of his ears or to his wrists. The smell mingled with his slow ruminations. The sense of the past grew in him. Memories built themselves with almost architectural order. In a box where he stored souvenirs he came across old pictures taken before his marriage. Alice sitting in a field of daisies. Alice with him in a canoe on the river. Also among the souvenirs there was a large bone hairpin that had belonged to his mother. As a little boy he had loved to watch her comb and knot her long black hair. He had thought that hairpins were curved as they were to copy the shape of a lady and he would sometimes play with them like dolls. At that time he had a cigar box full of scraps. He loved the feel and colors of beautiful cloth and he would sit with his scraps for hours under the kitchen table. But when he was six his mother took the scraps away from him. She was a tall, strong woman with a sense of duty like a man. She had loved him best. Even now he sometimes dreamed of her. And her worn gold wedding ring stayed on his finger always. (p. 192)

Biff's rapturous transport into the past is indicative of the basic orientation of his psyche toward transcendence. Despite his commercial enterprise, he is soul-oriented rather than body-oriented. His secret and forbidden love for Mick points toward the darker side of the self, and he is by nature a nocturnal creature who revels in the sights and sounds of the nighttime. Prior to Alice's death, the management of the 24-hour diner is divided into a night shift which is Biff's and a day shift which is Alice's.

The light/dark motif is further developed by means of contrast in the individual apparel worn by Biff and Baby for Alice's funeral. Biff is somberly dressed in black, while Baby is completely attired in white. The white is altogether appropriate for Baby who is body-oriented with her earthly aspirations for fame and material success. On the other

hand, Biff's identification with darkness and night is indicative of his yearning for Light and transcendence.

In the end it is Biff who is granted the epiphany enabling him to undergo momentary transcendence. Hassan comments that Biff emerges as the "image of clumsy endurance" and though his vision "falls short of redemption," it "is somehow more central than Singer's and more viable."<sup>15</sup> In the Jungian sense, Biff comes to symbolize "modern" man who "stands upon a peak, or at the very edge of the world, the abyss of the future before him, above him the heavens, and below him the whole of mankind with a history that disappears in primeval mists."<sup>16</sup> Mrs. McCullers' description of Biff at the moment of his epiphany is reminiscent of Jung's statement:

For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor, of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who--one word--love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. Sharply he turned away. (p. 306)

Both the androgynous personality of Biff and his predisposition toward the philosophical, the abstract and the

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<sup>15</sup> Radical Innocence, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1933), p. 197.

spiritual are manifestations of an essentially classical temperament; he readily acknowledges that he is more attuned to classical Greek society. He speculates endlessly with customers on which historical period they would choose if they could be reborn into another time and place. Naturally, he chooses to be reborn in ancient Greece and conjures up pictures of himself in sandals and loose robes walking near the Aegean watching the children, visiting the marble baths and generally leading a contemplative life.

When he poses the same question to Jake Blount, the answer is altogether appropriate to Jake's untamed, barbaric and revolutionary disposition, for he elects to be reborn among the Incas of Peru or else in the thick of the American Revolution. While Jake identifies himself with the savage, he is anything but the stereotyped ideal of the noble savage. He possesses a raging, uncontrollable temperament that is best characterized by excessiveness, a feature which sets him in marked contrast to Biff who represents restraint, moderation and reason in the best classical sense. Jake exhibits a barbaric gusto for life demonstrated by his maniacal laugh and his alcoholic binges which are the result of his gluttonous appetite for life itself. Despite his slight stature, he is a frenzied, seething being who overwhelms those who encounter him by his barbaric behavior and his inflammatory rhetoric. He sees himself as Everyman in the proletarian sense, and in one of his drunken frenzies, he declares, "' I'm part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All

of those. And I'm Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American'" (p. 18).

Jake's identification with "Universal Man" and his "Universal Plight," the struggle for freedom, is a unique and distorted expression of Agape vis a vis Marxist doctrine. His dual roles as evangelist preacher and socialist propagandist are synthesized, for he views himself as both latter-day Christ and latter-day Karl Marx. His dream of the ideal triumvirate consists of Jesus, Marx and Jake Blount. He pictures himself as the socialist redeemer of the human race. So clearly does he identify with Christ that, caught in the emotional throes of a stirring evangelist sermon, he goes home and nails his hand to a table. His later transformation from evangelist to socialist is yet another attempt to maintain his identity with Christ. He proclaims Jesus a revolutionary and declares unequivocally, "Jesus would be framed and in jail if he was living today" (p. 134).

Everything about Jake's disposition and appearance points to distortion and confusion including his twisted interpretation of the gospel as socialist propaganda. Biff's initial impression of him is that he is a freak, although closer examination reveals no external deformity, and he surmises that the aberration is probably mental. While Jake's jargonish vocabulary and emotional oratory may at first glance seem impressive, he frequently misuses words, thereby confusing rather than clarifying his meaning. As a reformer all he has going for him is his misdirected zeal,

for the more he talks the more he blunders. This is best attested to in the case of Willy Copeland, the tragic victim of cruel and abusive prison practices which have left him an amputee. Jake wishes to "help" Willy and in the process promote the cause of the proletariat by putting Willy on public display as an example of the inhumanity of capitalism. Although not a malevolent man, Jake is terribly misguided, and the result is a kind of inverted Agape that is more destructive than productive in the name of brotherly love. He comes off as a visionary with a distorted vision, an idealist with twisted ideals.

The socialist cause which Jake espouses is tainted with selfishness. As the novel progresses, Jake's pursuit of the humanitarian cause of socialism becomes less and less oriented toward the group and more and more oriented toward the self. His veneration of Jesus and Marx is basically narcissistic since it is nothing more than the adulation of his own ideal self. In his subconscious he comes to identify Christ with John Singer who then assumes the proportions of Jake's personal redeemer after he rescues him off the streets. While Biff feeds him, it is Singer who supplies Jake with a temporary refuge. But more than ministering to Jake's physical needs, Singer, unwittingly acts as his spiritual redeemer, renewing his interest in life, his faith in himself and encouraging him by his good example to mend his reprobate ways. By merely listening to Blount's interminable confessions in his quiet and reserved way, he acts

as a balm to soothe his troubled soul.

In his relationship with Blount, Singer functions in terms of Eros and Agape in the combined role of beloved and redeemer, and as a natural consequence of Singer's double role, Jake, too, assumes the dual role of lover and disciple.<sup>17</sup> He trails along behind Singer in a fashion reminiscent of the way in which Singer followed his beloved Antonapoulos. But as a follower of Singer and an emulator of his ways, he is simultaneously cast in the role of disciple.

The death of Singer must likewise be considered in terms of the dual role he assumes in his relationship with Blount. When Jake learns of the death of Singer, his immediate response is one of anger, defiance, and despair, the classic response of a lover and follower of Ares according to Socrates--a response identical to the one Singer exhibits upon learning of the death of his beloved Antonapoulos:

Singer was dead. And the way he had felt when he first heard that he had killed himself was not sad--it was angry. He was before a wall. He remembered all the inner-most thoughts that he had told to Singer, and with his death it seemed to him that they were lost. And why had Singer wanted to end his life? Maybe he had gone insane. But anyway he was dead, dead, dead. He could not be seen or touched or spoken to, and the room where they had spent so many hours had been rented to a girl who worked as a typist. He could go there no longer. He was alone. A wall, a flight of stairs, an open road. (pp. 291-92)

In terms of Agape, however, the death of Singer be-

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<sup>17</sup> Madden, p. 129. In his article Madden views all four admirers of Singer as his disciples, but I prefer here to emphasize the role of Blount, whose natural tendency is to pursue causes with the zeal of a disciple of reform.

comes a positive sign, a promise of salvation. As Jake flees from the outbreak of violence at the carnival where he was employed, he runs into Simms, the street-corner evangelist who is out recruiting for his evening revival, ironically titled "He died to save you." It does indeed appear that Singer's death is redemptive because it is the determining factor in Jake's decision to leave town, in itself a positive act. Thus the journey itself comes to represent rebirth and affirmation:

As soon as the town was behind a new surge of energy came to him. But was this flight or was it onslaught? Anyway, he was going. All this to begin another time. The road lay ahead to the north and slightly to the west. But he would not go too far away. He would not leave the South. That was one clear thing. There was hope in him, and soon perhaps the outline of his journey would take form.  
(p. 299)

The death of Mr. Singer similarly exercises a profound impact on Benedict Mady Copeland, the town's Negro doctor, whose entire life has been dedicated to the relentless and idealistic pursuit of the "strong true purpose" which he comes to identify so fervently with Singer. But in the case of Copeland, the death of Singer produces a negative rather than a positive effect, as it had on Blount. After Singer's suicide, Dr. Copeland undergoes a conspicuous physical and, most importantly, spiritual decline. He no longer retains the will nor the strength to pursue the abstract cause with which he associated Singer.

Of all those who love and venerate Singer, it is Copeland who most nearly exemplifies the lover in the com-

plete Platonic sense. He is an intellectual, completely absorbed with the abstract and ever in search of the ideal, of absolute truth. For him, Singer epitomizes absolute, unadulterated truth. But truth to a man like Copeland, who could very well have stepped out of the pages of Winesburg, Ohio as an Anderson grotesque, is his own particular truth, the truth of the scientist.

By nature Copeland is a deeply religious man, though not in any orthodox sense, for he shuns the Christian god. Nevertheless, he puts his complete faith and trust in science, and it is the heroes of science that he deifies. But Copeland's love of science coincides with his abstract love of humanity; and his devotion to science and its humanitarian pursuits is married to his belief in the principles of social justice and equality. Not surprisingly, the trinity he adores in his religion of science is comprised of Spinoza, Shakespeare and Marx--a humanitarian scientist, a humanitarian writer, and a humanitarian socialist. But it is Spinoza who ranks uppermost in this tri-partite godhead. And so after a time Dr. Copeland comes to refashion Singer, with his obscure and presumably Jewish origins, in the image of his venerable god of science, Spinoza.

Aside from his pursuit of the ideals of racial justice and equality, Copeland appears to scorn his Negritude in every way. His profession as a doctor distinguishes him from the uneducated, poverty-stricken masses of the Negro community, as do many of his mannerisms. As the scientist



he is rational, positivistic and restrained; he shuns emotion and superstition which are so innately a part of the poor Negro community. He vehemently rejects the teachings of Christianity because he is convinced that they, more than anything else, have imbued the Negro with meekness.

Rigidly disciplined, spartan and utilitarian, he is a practicing vegetarian. His preference in dress and home furnishings is for plain, dark, sturdy things. Nor does he allow himself to lapse into Negro dialect, but speaks scrupulously measured standard English. As Madden observes, everything about Copeland bespeaks unnaturalness, restraint and repression. He eschews his blackness even to the extreme of repressing his primitive impulse to surrender to the Negro blues.

Madden further comments on the dramatic contrast between the rational, restrained Copeland and his wife Daisy who is the embodiment of feminine vitality. Even her name appropriately suggests a vital, organic essence.<sup>18</sup> Daisy's entire family, in fact, exudes the same organic vitality, for they are country people with a deep and abiding love for the land. Daisy's daughter Portia speaks lovingly of the rich fecundity of her grandfather's soil and the strong emotional ties that bind the family to their land. Like her mother, Portia emanates this powerful feminine vitality, coupled with a strong maternal instinct.

The basic dichotomy manifest between father and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

daughter is symbolically expressed in the light/dark motif running through the novel. As was suggested earlier, Copeland is consistently associated with images of darkness, while Portia is associated with lightness and brightness. Copeland dresses in dark, somber clothes, while Portia, her husband, and her brother prefer bright or light colors. Much of the doctor's time is spent in deep and brooding contemplation carried on in the dark, but Portia spends her time in "clean-well lighted" places such as the Kelly's kitchen or her church meetings. When Portia chastises her father for sitting in the dark, his simple reply, "'The dark suits me,'" (p. 61) reveals his own identification with darkness. The overwhelming emotions that he struggles so fiercely to repress are described as "black, terrible feelings" which "let him down into the regions of death" (p. 284).

The most obvious expression of the light/dark motif is in the differentiation of their skin tones, for Copeland's skin is very dark, while Portia's is very light, like her mother's. Portia herself is extremely conscious of the distinction and attaches great significance to it. It is tied to her resentment of her father's use of the generic term Negro rather than the more polite form colored:

'Take Willie and me. Us aren't all the way colored. Our Mama was real light and both of us haves a good deal of white folk's blood in us. And Highboy--he Indian. He got a good part Indian in him. None of us is pure colored and the word you all the time using haves a way of hurting peoples' feelings.'  
(p. 66)

Although she is "colored," Portia thinks in terms of

"white" and "near-white." She even judges beauty and ugliness in terms of light and dark, speaking contemptuously of Love Jones, whose ugliness and promiscuity she associates with the degree of darkness of her skin: "'What I can't understand is how come he (Willie) be messing around with that Love. She at least ten shades blacker than I am and she the ugliest nigger I ever seen" (pp. 116-17). Portia has not only been influenced genetically with the inheritance of lighter skin from her mother's family, but by the "white" orientation of their thinking as well. Her grandfather's fondest dream is that on the judgement day he and all his family will find their heavenly reward when God transforms the color of their skin so they "will be white as cotton" (p. 124).

Implicit in Portia's identification with lightness is her identification with Christianity, the white man's religion. Like their grandfather, she and her brother Willie are preoccupied with salvation by a white god and resurrection into a heaven filled with snow-white angels. But more importantly, as a Christian, she becomes the embodiment of Agape with her selfless, maternal concern for her own family, as well as the Kelly family, particularly Mick. More than any other character in Mrs. McCullers' novels, she bears a striking resemblance to Faulkner's Dilsey, and, like Dilsey, she too comes to symbolize "endurance." Despite overwhelming odds, she has a strong, unflinching instinct for survival, and her concern, unlike her father's, is not with dark-

ness and death, but with the daily struggle for existence on this earth and with Christian rebirth, via good works and salvation.

In contrast with Portia's strong instinct for survival, her father is equally inclined toward death. Most of his peculiar mannerisms are subconscious expressions of the death wish, particularly his attraction for darkness, his fondness for abstraction, and his relentless pursuit of "the strong true purpose." Moreover, his indifference to death is reflected in his daily confrontation with it as a doctor and in his casual, but deliberate neglect of his own dire medical needs. But most apparent of all is his loss of the will to continue his struggles after Singer's death, an event which portends his own desire for release from earthly bondage and commitment. Willingly, he abandons his medical practice and returns to the country with his wife's family, an act which heralds his physical and spiritual decline.

The death wish signifies the most acute yearning for transcendence, and Copeland therefore comes to symbolize Eros, just as Portia epitomizes Agape, or Christian love. In view of what has been demonstrated in this analysis as the dual expression of love, vis a vis Eros and Agape, the title of the novel gains added significance. By nature the heart is a seeker of two kinds of love. More importantly, the heart seeks love, not as an end in itself, but as a means to a greater end--whether it be transcendence or salvation.

In this chapter we have examined the writer's preoc-

cupation with abstraction and myth as displayed in human relationships dominated by Eros and Agape and the Manichaeian sensibility which directs the presentation of these motifs of love in terms of dualities and dichotomies reflected in the use of light and dark imagery. The next chapter will consider Reflections in a Golden Eye, a novel almost wholly conceived in the kind of imagistic and figurative terms more commonly associated with poetry.

### CHAPTER III

#### REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE: CARSON

#### MCCULLERS' GOLDEN ICON

In early 1941 Mrs. McCullers' second book, Reflections in a Golden Eye, appeared.<sup>1</sup> Despite their common authorship, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Reflections in a Golden Eye are vastly different in mood, tone, and style. The complex radiating structure and intertwining threads of plot, the refreshing glimpses of childhood innocence, and the youthful outpouring of tenderness and compassion which characterized her first novel are all conspicuously absent from the second. Instead she turns from these concerns to the manipulation of image and symbol as she plunges below the surface in an effort to explore the darkest most primitive levels of human awareness in a sepulchral atmosphere where both characters and readers alike wait with dreaded anticipation for the unspeakable to occur. In Reflections in a Golden Eye, the writer gives us a brilliantly conceived tour de force, tight, controlled and detached, which moves with the rhythm and grace of a fine romantic poem.

Perhaps no one, not even the author herself, is more

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<sup>1</sup> The novel first appeared serially in 1940 in the October and November issues of Harper's Bazaar.

aware of these imagistic, poetic qualities than Tennessee Williams, whose illuminating introduction to the novel reflects his understanding and appreciation of the sensibilities and artistry underlying it. By means of an imaginary dialogue with an adverse critic, who tends to take the book too literally, he explains that the Sense of Dreadfulness "is not a reaction to anything sensible or visible or even, strictly, materially, knowable. But rather it's a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called thing. It is the incommunicable something that we shall have to call mystery which is so inspiring of dread among these modern artists that we have been talking about. . . ." <sup>2</sup>

In elementary fashion, he explains to the adversary that the bizarre characters and the violent happenings are the "externals" or symbols through which the awfulness is compressed. Williams concludes his essay with high praise for the book as "one of the purest and most powerful of those works which are conceived in that Sense of the Awful which is the desperate black root of nearly all significant modern art from the Guernica of Picasso to the cartoons of Charles Addams." <sup>3</sup> He finds in the novel "an absolute mastery of design" which surpasses the skills of a merely professional writer. <sup>4</sup> In Reflections in a Golden Eye, he finds

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<sup>2</sup> Reflections in a Golden Eye (New York: Bantam, 1970), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

manifested the talents and vision of the artist as writer, who seeks to create a fictive world which has its own dimensions of reality. Moreover, the tragic climate is refined and purified to distill the essence of a finely cast work of art: "a Grecian purity cools it, the eventually overwhelming impact is of a more reflective order."<sup>5</sup>

The key to a proper understanding and appreciation of the novel lies in a further exploration of the implications underlying Williams's essay. First of all, the book is not to be taken literally and measured against the norms of external or everyday reality. Rather, it must be approached with a sensitive awareness to the aesthetic sensibilities which shape it as a work of art. It creates its own dimensions of reality which must be accepted as the aesthetic norm and which must not be measured against the pressures of the quotidian. Like a Wallace Stevens poem, the novel takes the chaotic materials of external reality and reshapes them into an orderly universe governed by aesthetic norms.

In this fictive world in which the bizarre becomes commonplace and the commonplace bizarre, the writer remains transcendently aloof. This kind of cool objectivity and detached style has, in part, caused critics like Evans to remark upon the similarity between Flaubert's and Mrs. McCullers' techniques.<sup>6</sup> But if we pursue the matter a bit fur-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. v.

<sup>6</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), p. 60.



ther, it becomes evident that this objectivity and apparent absence of emotion on the part of the artist grow out of the 19th and 20th century poetic tradition, rather than the tradition of realistic fiction. The ultimate effect of this detached objectivity is aesthetic distance. The novel employs what Keats has described as negative capability and what Eliot calls the objective correlative, the pure distillation and objectification of emotion.

This refinement of emotion is best demonstrated in the quintessential symbol of the world of art within the novel, Anacleto's ghastly green peacock with the huge reflecting golden eye. Because there are rather extraordinary affinities between this particular novel and some of Keats's poetry, a brief comparison should prove illuminating. The peacock is to the McCullers novel what the Grecian urn is to Keats's poem, an objective correlative, a visible product of the creative imagination. Even their functions within the respective works are similar. Just as the "sylvan historian" of Keats's poem records the "flowery tale" of the Grecian pastoral, so too does the golden eye of the peacock capture the reflecting scenes of modern life.

Keats tells us in his poem that in the world of art, things are immutable, time stands still, and life is frozen at the moment of perfection. The Grecian urn captures the "marble men and maidens" at the very height of youth, beauty and passion and renders them immutable, thereby preserving and immortalizing the ideal:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,  
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal--yet, do not grieve;  
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss  
 Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

The world of art as depicted through the "cold pastoral" of the Grecian urn is a static universe, a world which maintains perfection through the state of suspended animation. A similar impression of stasis is achieved in Reflections in a Golden Eye, through the lethargic movement of the narration, the atmosphere of decadence, and the concentration on the image of the peacock. It has been this apparently lifeless, static quality that has been so disturbing to such normally perceptive critics as Schorer and Hassan. Schorer describes the climate of the novel as "a world of static rage and drugged destructiveness. Better that other world (of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter) for all its pain."<sup>7</sup> In an even more disparaging tone, Hassan comments "Yet, it is not the pretense of underlying dreadfulness to which one objects; it is rather the absence of life."<sup>8</sup> In both cases the shortsightedness of the critics is that they fail to appreciate the fact that they are not dealing with external reality where vital activity is the norm, but

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<sup>7</sup> The World We Imagine (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968), p. 278.

<sup>8</sup> Radical Innocence (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 218.

rather with the world of art, where stasis is the norm.

It is not terribly difficult to perceive how Keats creates a static atmosphere through the compressed medium of the poem which presents the urn as a work of art and then describes the still-life or "cold pastoral" engraved on it. Indeed the creation of a static, dream-like world is normal enough within the realm of poetry and fine art; hence, the ability to create such a dream-like world is by no means an extraordinary feat for the skillful poet-artist. For obvious reasons, it is far more difficult for the novelist to create and sustain a static atmosphere because the extended narrative of the novel traditionally necessitates action of some sort to maintain a level of realism, interest and continuity. Herein lie the true skills of Mrs. McCullers as artist-novelist, for she possesses both the lyrical control and dreamy imagination of the poet-artist. In this novel she manages to create and sustain a chilling, unreal mood in which physical and spiritual paralysis and ultimately death itself establish the pervasive norm.

The story takes place on a Southern army post in peacetime, a setting which in itself suggests inactivity and complacency. Her introductory description of the setting establishes the mood and tone of the novel, and, at the same time, puts the reader in a kind of lethargic trance, much like that of the characters themselves. The uninspired layout of the base suggests a kind of deadening monotony and conformity as does the unchanging daily military routine:

An army post in peacetime is a dull place. Things happen, but then they happen over and over again. The general plan of a fort in itself adds to the monotony--the huge concrete barracks, the neat rows of officers' homes built one precisely like the other, the gym, the chapel, the golf course and the swimming pools--all is designed according to a certain rigid pattern. But perhaps the dullness of a post is caused most of all by insularity and by a surfeit of leisure and safety, for once a man enters the army, he is expected only to follow the heels ahead of him.

The overall effect of mood and setting is not unlike the "cold pastoral" found on the Grecian urn. The army post is located in a rural area, the nearest town being one hundred fifty miles away. To reinforce the notion of country life, there are stables, horse-back riding being one of the favorite recreational pastimes on the post. Moreover, the woods surrounding the stables are rich and verdant, and there is about them a kind of rugged, primitive beauty. Life in general, but more particularly the social life on the base, is leisurely and even languid in keeping with the Southern life style to which the major characters, the Penbertons, have been accustomed. The season in which the story is set is autumn, and the weather, which is often alluded to, ranges from mildly cool to chilling cold. There is an atmosphere of impending doom, and death is a familiar and lingering thought in the minds of many of the participants in the story.

At this point an examination of both the style of characterization, as well as the characters themselves,

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<sup>9</sup> Reflections, pp. 1-2. Subsequent quotations cited from this edition within chapter by page number.

would be very illuminating. The reader should be forewarned against taking the characters too literally. Too often they have been lightly dismissed as bizarre and perversely distasteful, because the reader fails to realize that they belong to the world of art as opposed to the world of conventional reality. They are flat and one-dimensional because they function as symbols of human excesses and aberrations. They are humour or type characters, though in the modern sense, and the human neuroses which they symbolize are those peculiar to Modern Man and his civilization.

Eisinger separates the characters into two groups or types, and his division appears to be a valid and useful one. The first group is the appetitive type who are completely governed by instinct and need and who live strictly for the gratification of their sensual appetites; this group consists of Leonora Penderton, Major Morris Langdon and Private Ellgee Williams. The second group is cerebral and cultivated and seeks gratification through intellectual, musical and artistic stimulation. To this latter group belong Captain Penderton, Alison Langdon and Anacleto.<sup>10</sup>

Leonora is not neurotic in the usual sense of the word. Being feeble-minded, she is not intelligent and aware enough to experience the intellectual and artistic frustrations that are the usual mark of neurosis. Instead she is all too fond a lover of life and all the good things it has

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<sup>10</sup> Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 252.

to offer--food, drink, sport and leisure living. Hence, she over-indulges her sensory appetites. A creature of instinct rather than intellect, she is more at home with animals, like her horse Firebird, and with people who possess the same animal spirit that governs her soul, like Morris Langdon and Private Williams. On the other hand, she is decidedly uncomfortable around her husband, Alison Langdon, and Anacleto, all of whom possess intellectual and artistic temperaments. In fact, Alison considers her an animal and with good reason. Leonora, despite her genteel Southern upbringing tends to be earthy and unrefined, with a real manly gusto for life. She enjoys drinking and relishes "sleeping in the raw." She has an instinctual rapport with animals, particularly Firebird. The relationship she enjoys with her horse is so intimate that it is highly suggestive of lover and mistress. Yet despite her seemingly coarse animalism and lack of intelligence, Leonora commands the respect of every man on the post, most of whom stand in awe of her powerful feminine vitality. Blonde and voluptuously beautiful, she is variously described as the "madonna" and is generally known among the men as "The Lady."

Leonora's insatiable appetites are repugnant to her ascetic husband, particularly her voracious sexual appetites. For that reason she is never without a lover, and her current lover is Morris Langdon, who, like her, is a sensual person married to an ascetic. A man with a hearty appetite for food, drink and sport, he thinks of himself as an animal and

a loyal soldier, his favorite aphorism being, "Only two things matter to me now--to be a good animal and to serve my country. A healthy body and patriotism" (p. 129).

Although she is totally oblivious of the fact, Leonora has a second lover, one who does not seek fulfillment through the usual channels of sexual consummation. This other lover is Private Ellgee Williams, a voyeur mesmerized by the sight of Leonora, who sneaks into her bedroom night after night to hold vigil while she sleeps blissfully unaware. Having been raised on a farm, he is an avid lover of nature and her creatures, an attribute which secures him the position of groom at the stables. Like Leonora, he is more comfortable with animals than with people, primarily because of his own keenly developed animal instincts, appetites and mannerisms. His physical description is meant to suggest his kinship with animals--his perpetual silence, his "dumb eyes, the heavy sensual lips that were often wet," (p. 103), and the "mute expression on his face that is found usually in the eyes of animals" (p. 2). He is decidedly more at home in the woods than in the barracks, and his movements as he maneuvers across the Penderton lawn and into the house are swift, silent and stealthy--almost cat-like.

The primitivism suggested in the descriptions of the young soldier has caught the attention of a number of critics who discern shades of Lawrence throughout the novel. Both Schorer and Evans remark upon the similarity between the love-hate relationship of Penderton and Williams and the

situation in "The Prussian Officer."<sup>11</sup> The young soldier's resemblance to and identification with animals cannot help but call to mind Women in Love and "The Fox," both of which rely heavily on animal-like descriptions of the characters. And many of Private Williams' escapades, such as running naked in the woods, are the same sort of unrepressed activities in which Lawrence's characters regularly indulge.

In contrast to Leonora, whose passionate vitality is strongly indicative of her attraction toward life itself, Private Williams is instinctually drawn to death, a condition suggested by his basic lethargy, passivity and uncommunicativeness. He succumbs to forbidden desires as night after night he deliberately tempts fate by his daring forays into the house of his own worst enemy, Captain Penderton. The perverse irrational behavior of Williams can only be explained as self-destructive; on the evening of his murder, he picks a fight in the barracks and then allows himself to be brutally beaten, an ominous portent of what is to come.

Captain Penderton's strange love-hate relationship with Private Williams is indicative of his ambivalent nature. His kinship with such other McCullers figures as Biff Brannon, John Singer and Mick Kelly is readily apparent in his androgynous personality, for he is sexually drawn to men as well as to women, particularly to his wife's lovers: "Sexually the Captain obtained within himself a delicate balance

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<sup>11</sup> The World We Imagine, p. 280. The Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 60.



between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both sexes and the active powers of neither" (p. 10). The Captain's sexual drives are not only latent, but dormant, as well; hence, he prefers the life of the mind to the life of the body.

He is described as a savant and an avid lover of poetry, an intelligent, thoughtful man capable of absorbing ideas but utterly incapable of generating them; here, as in his sexual life, there is the complete absence of vitality necessary for active and original thought. Possessing none of his wife's exuberant lust for life, he exists instead in a kind of twilight zone from which he can scarcely arouse himself. Like Private Williams, he is strongly attracted to death, living in a world of dreams and nightmarish fantasies.

Basically a self-destructive person, he exhibits decidedly sado-masochistic tendencies. His psychological history includes a number of atrocities perpetrated on animals, culminating with the cruel and defiant beating of Firebird, a symbolic attempt to violently subdue the animalism in his own nature. An ascetic with the disposition of a medieval monk, he regularly indulges in self-imposed penances (his coarse wrapper resembles a hair shirt) and even prefers the austerity and cloistered life of the barracks to the comfort of home. It is small wonder that his favorite historical period is the medieval period. But the greatest evidence of his masochistic will to self-annihilation is the compelling urge to ride horseback in spite of his uncontrol-

lable fear. In light of this, his determination to ride Firebird, whose temperament is wild and fiery, is a reckless flirtation with death.

While Captain Penderton and Private Williams find the prospect of death rather tantalizing, Alison Langdon, with her failing health and ailing heart, perpetually lives in its shadow and finds it all too vividly real and terrifying. Neither possessing Leonora's fearless grip on life, nor Penderton's and Williams's veiled longing for death, Alison is unhappily trapped and momentarily suspended between both. She, above all the others, is the prototypical neurotic, fearful and distrustful of everything, secure about nothing. The possessor of a fragile artistic temperament, she is unable to cope with life's harsh realities; she is in the world, but not of it. The birth and subsequent loss of an abnormal child are too much for her to bear, and she collapses both physically and emotionally under the strain which leaves her a semi-invalid. Then tragedy strikes again when she learns of her husband's adulterous affair with Leonora. In a fit of despair, she attempts to desex herself. Her only recourse to counter the harsh blows that life has dealt her is to escape into the world of art. Recoiling from the coarseness of the military life, she ingratiates herself with culture and attempts to lose herself in the world of fine art and music.

Oddly enough, Alison becomes the inadvertent casualty of the voyeuristic forays into Leonora's bedroom. It is she who witnesses the soldier's clandestine activities in the

Penderton house and she who reports them to Captain Pender-ton. But in a novel such as this one where irrationality is the norm, such a sane and rational act is deemed highly abnormal, with the ironic result that Alison is declared insane and packed off immediately to an asylum where she dies soon after of a heart attack.

Although life for Alison Langdon is nothing more than an unmitigated series of frustrations and ordeals, she is not forced to bear the brunt of it alone, for she has her house-boy companion, Anacleto, to commiserate with her. The strong bond of affection between the Filipino and his mistress presents us with an interesting heterosexual variation of Fiedler's light-dark pair. The intimate relationship these two enjoy is very much akin to that of Siamese twins, and indeed they tend to think of themselves as twins. Even their names have a certain alliterative harmony. Moreover, Anacleto exhibits a telepathic response to Alison's sensory and emotional experiences, even to the point of suffering labor pains along with her.

More than any other character in the novel he personifies the artist-type with his creative talent and vivid imagination. And it is he who conjures up the vision of the ghastly green peacock with the golden reflecting eye. The vision, like his own paintings, is all the more dramatic because it is both sophisticated and primitive. But this anomaly extends beyond Anacleto's artistic imagination; it is innately true of the artist himself. On the one hand, he

views himself as a highly civilized and vastly superior being, one who like Alison herself steeps himself in high culture and enjoys the finer things of life.

Beneath the veneer of sophistication and the layers of fine clothes, however, there lurks a primitive soul that his monkeyish behavior can scarcely belie. In everything but his art, Anacleto is imitative. His speech is an exact mimicry of Alison's. His lithe, graceful movements are a slavish imitation of the ballet which has him so enthralled, and his stilted textbook French is more a tribute to the power of his memory than to his intellect. Even Anacleto's physical appearance gives the impression of a fanciful, primitive creature of mythic proportions, for he truly resembles a woodland sprite, a contemporary descendant of Puck, if you will. Here again we see the norms of external reality overturned, for the vain and narcissistic Anacleto is contemptuous of anyone not like himself and views the great mass of so-called "normal" or ordinary people as deviations from his artistic norm: "It was common knowledge that he thought the Lord had blundered grossly in the making of everyone except himself and Madame Alison--the sole exceptions to this were people behind footlights, midgets, great artists, and such-like fabulous folk" (p. 43).

But the very special narcissistic relationship shared by these two uncommon people is but a sampling of the unconventional relationships to be found in the novel, the two most crucial ones being the passion of the young soldier for

Leonora and the ambivalent feelings of Captain Penderton toward the soldier. Although the relationship between Leonora and Private Williams may strike the reader as shockingly original, the voyeuristic affair does have an analogue in the Madeline-Porphyro romance in Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes," and a comparison between the two is worth pursuing.

Keats's poem, based partially on an episode of Biancofiore and Florio in Boccaccio's "Il Filocolo," attempts to weave a medieval tapestry with words. The medieval setting gains added significance when one recalls that this is Captain Penderton's favorite historical period. This is small wonder, for the feudal style of life has much in common with the style of living on the post itself, and more especially so since it is located in the South. Life on a Southern post tends to be both leisurely and sumptuous, brimming with lively festivities in which tremendous amounts of alcohol and rich food are consumed. Even the design of the post itself with its concrete barracks and outlying buildings bears a kindred resemblance to the medieval castle fortress. But perhaps the most striking similarity of all is the caste system inherent in the military system of ranks in which the officers are modern representations of the feudal warriors and nobility while the soldiers represent the serfs.

In addition to the similarity of the settings, the mood and atmosphere evoked in Keats' poem create the same artistic stasis present in the McCullers novel. "The Eve of St. Agnes," like "Ode on a Grecian Urn," attempts through

words to conjure a visual presentation of a work of art, in this case a medieval tapestry. The still-life effect is created by the numbing cold outside the castle walls and the lethargic atmosphere within.

Against the backdrop of this chilling, death-foreboding atmosphere, there is presented a contrasting scene of hot-blooded, debauched revelry in the magnificent lower chambers of the Baron's castle in which splendidly arrayed warrior-guests and their ladies dance and jest and overindulge their appetites on huge amounts of delectable food and drink:

At length burst in the argent revelry,  
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,  
Numerous as shadows haunting fairily  
The brain, new stuffed, in youth, with triumphs gay  
Of old romance.

The festivities hosted by the Baron are very much like Leonora's own gay military parties which are the bright spot of an otherwise lifeless post. For such special occasions the tables are lavishly set and groaning with the weight of ham, spareribs and whisky while the guests dance, sing, gossip and generally behave like civilized swine.

While the parallels between mood and setting are an important consideration of this comparative study, they are merely supportive and would be rendered meaningless were it not for the fact that the central action of both the poem and the novel are so closely akin. The Madeline-Porphyro romance finds an interesting variation in the Leonora-Private Williams affair. Leonora becomes the contemporary representation of the fair lady of medieval courtly love. Her name

has that dreamy, sonorous ring so typical of the literary heroine's. Her physical description is remarkably like that of the fair lady of courtly love, an ivory skinned beauty with an angelic face framed by bronze hair; Leonora is described as possessing a countenance that bears "the bemused placidity of a Madonna's" (p. 7). The very fact that on the post she is known reverentially to officers and soldiers alike as "The Lady" serves to reinforce her courtly image and kinship with the Lady Madeline.

In the meantime, Private Williams, the contemporary Porphyro, is obsessed with the idea of watching "The Lady" as she sleeps. He daringly trespasses on the grounds of the enemy and furtively makes his way to the bedroom to gaze in quiet worship of his Lady and perhaps even to touch her:

Very slowly the soldier tiptoed to the side of the bed and bent over the Captain's wife. The moon softly lighted their faces and he was so close that he could feel her even breath. In the soldier's grave eyes there was at first an expression of intent curiosity, but as the moments passed a look of bliss awakened in his heavy face. The young soldier felt in him a keen, strange sweetness that never before in his life had he known. (p. 58)

One might well compare this passage of Mrs. McCullers' with Keats's description of young Porphyro as he beholds the sleeping Madeline:

. . . Meantime, across the moors,  
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire  
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,  
Buttressed from moonlight, stands he, and implores  
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,  
But for one moment in the tedious hours,  
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;  
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss--in sooth such  
things have been.

The sight of Madeline not only proves disarming but transports the young lover into raptures beyond his wildest dreams, for she is beauty incarnate and about her there is a romantic aura that permeates her very surroundings. Although Madeline herself is not actively engaged in the role of wily seductress, nevertheless, her exotic boudoir with its glittering jewels and ornaments and its sumptuous delicacies piled high on elegant dishes of gold and silver is fashioned in the seductive style of the Spenserian Bower of Bliss.

While it is by no means unusual to find the lush Spenserian style and symbolism incorporated in 19th century romantic poetry, it is rather extraordinary to discover conspicuous traces of it in a 20th century novel; however, Mrs. McCullers does indeed rely on lush, sensual language and images rich in colors, textures and detail designed to titillate the senses in her modern version of the Bower of Bliss. Again, the boudoir, as much as the woman herself, exudes the overpowering sensuality to which the lover is compellingly drawn. The following description is given of Leonora in her boudoir on the first night of the young soldier's vigil, and though it is tighter, more restrained and sparser in detail, it does evoke the same drowsy sensuality found in Keats's descriptions of Madeline and her boudoir: "Green shadowy moonlight filled the room. The Captain's wife slept as her husband had left her. Her soft hair lay loosened upon the pillow and her gently breathing chest was half-uncovered. A yellow silk spread was on the bed and an open flask of per-



fume sweetened the air with a drowsy scent" (p. 58). The overpowering feminine vitality of Leonora permeates the surroundings and is reflected in the variety of textures and aromas that partake of her very essence. It is not at all surprising that the young soldier responds so compellingly to Leonora's sensual appeal, for he is a sensual creature.

Thus far we have dealt with the conspicuous similarities between the Keats romance-poem and the McCullers romance-novel, but it would be a grave injustice to both if we were to gloss over the significant differences in the manner of presentation of the romance, as well as the basic difference in the romantic vision of both artists. Keats's poem represents the pure, unadulterated vision of romance as an obvious flight from reality rather than an attempt to reckon with it. This much is clearly revealed by the conclusion where the fleeing lovers escape the debauchery within the castle in search of an ideal world without. Everything connected with the lovers is divorced from imperfection, the prime symbol of reality within the poem. Madeline's beauty is flawless, while Porphyro is Prince Charming incarnate. Even the setting in which they are placed, the boudoir itself, is untainted by any imperfection. In this respect, the upper-story isolation of this romantic and ideal setting gains added significance, for it reinforces the ethereal image of the boudoir in contrast with the finite, earthiness of the lower story where the revelry and debauchery take place. Moreover, Keats's choice of the medieval period, the traditional set-

ting of the romance, further emphasizes the remoteness of the poem and its complete departure from reality.

In contrast with this, the McCullers romance has a contemporary setting, an unlikely situation which hints at the complexity underlying her own romantic vision as opposed to the pure, unadulterated vision of Keats. Like the hybrid genre in which she writes, the vision of Carson McCullers is mixed; romanticism is not romanticism for its own sake, but is rather another dimension of reality, or another way to gain a perspective of reality. Even the most high-flown, romantic elements of the novel are undercut by the unexpected realistic detail. In Reflections in a Golden Eye, she fully demonstrates the legacy of the modern Southern writer, who, according to her essay, "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature," inherits a mixed vision which synthesizes farce with tragedy.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the novel there are touches of irony and humor set out in the guise of realistic detail which tend to deflate the bubbles of romantic illusion. The hero of Keats's poem is a highborn young nobleman, while the protagonist-lover in the McCullers novel is a dim-witted country hick in the army. Keats describes Madeline as ethereally beautiful, pure and chaste--without blemish or flaw. Leonora, on the other hand, is not only beautiful and provocative; she is also a little feeble-minded, as Mrs. McCullers

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<sup>12</sup> The Mortgaged Heart (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 286.

confides. While Madeline's lovely virginal head is filled with romantic notions, Leonora's is unable to retain anything more difficult than the next dinner menu.

The lush descriptive passages of the sleeping Leonora are regularly punctuated with the unexpected realistic detail that tends to deflate the romance, or at least bring it into a more realistic perspective:

Again that night the moonlight was clear and silver in the room. The Lady lay on her side with her warm oval face cupped between her rather grubby hands. She wore a satin nightgown and the cover was pushed down to her waist. The young soldier crouched silent by the bedside. Once he reached out warily and felt the slippery cloth of her nightgown with his thumb and forefinger. For a time he stood before the bureau and contemplated the bottles, powder puffs, and toilet articles. One object, an atomizer, had aroused his interest, and he had taken it to the window and examined it with a puzzled face. On the table there was a saucer holding a half-eaten chicken leg. The soldier touched it, smelled, and took a bite. (p. 96)

Amid the rich satins that adorn the sleeping figure and the array of perfumes, such details as "grubby hands" and a "half-eaten chicken leg" seem ludicrously out of place.

But such incongruous details are deliberately placed in the romantic setting because they serve as reminders of the coarser reality that lies outside the dream-like atmosphere of the bedroom. Ultimately they symbolize the raw vitality of life itself as opposed to the languid stasis which permeates the sepulchral boudoir. Here it is important to emphasize the dichotomous nature of Leonora herself. To most of her acquaintances she is the sportswoman and convivial hostess par excellence, a free-spirited creature who

exudes vitality and seems as much at home in the stables and woods as she does in her own living room. This is the unromantic component of her ambiguous personality, the Leonora with mouth and wit as raw and coarse as her "grubby hands": "'Why, my God, Alison! My party! I've been working like a nigger for the past three days getting everything ready. I don't give a party like this but twice a year'" (p. 66).

While the unromantic half of Leonora's personality is associated with the raw earthiness of life, the romantic half embodies the erotic yearning for death, and it is this latter element to which Private Williams is strongly drawn. Although his memories and dreams of her are completely sensual, he associates her completely with the lethargy of the bedroom rather than the raw vitality of the stables. His fantasies of her are subconscious realizations of the death wish that she comes to symbolize:

He never thought of her in connection with the stables or the open air. To him she was always in the room where he had watched her in the night with such absorption. His memory of these times was wholly sensual. There was the thick rug beneath his feet, the silk spread, the faint scent of perfume. There was the soft luxurious warmth of woman-flesh, the quiet darkness--the alien sweetness in his heart and the tense power in his body as he crouched there near to her. Once having known this he could not let it go; in him was engendered a dark, drugged craving as certain of fulfillment as death. (p. 137)

Thus Leonora becomes the ambiguous symbol of both life and death, as placid and content in the boudoir as she is exuberant in the outdoors. It is significantly revealing that although Captain Penderton is fascinated by death, he, unlike Private Williams, fails to identify the death wish

with Leonora. Instead he views her in quite the opposite light. As a symbol of the vitality of life, she repels him. He flees the bedroom in an attempt to escape her hot-blooded sexuality, and, ironically, retreats into the forest to escape the animal vitality he associates with Leonora and with their home, as a kind of animal lair.

His journey into the forest, with all its archetypal import, is a key passage in the novel and one that should be carefully examined in any serious analysis. By this point it should be clear that three images tend to dominate the work: the citadel or fortress, the reflecting eye of the peacock, and the journey. Malin explains in New American Gothic that the old Gothic images of the haunted castle, the journey into the forest and the reflection become the "objective correlates" of the psyche in Hawthorne and James and are inherited and translated into modern symbols by the New American Gothic writers, such as Mrs. McCullers.<sup>13</sup>

As we examine Penderton's journey into the forest, we should bear in mind that the death wish expresses the ineffable and is essentially lyrical. More to the point, we should consider "Ode to a Nightingale," which is, in effect, a lyrical expression of the death wish, for the persona of the poem and the Captain share in common the same voyage into the darker regions of the soul. The opening lines of the poem are particularly apropos of Captain Penderton, a chronic

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<sup>13</sup> Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 79.

drug user:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains,  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

In his drug-like lethargy, the speaker addresses the night-  
ingale, his spiritual mentor whom he wishes to follow in  
this dark pursuit. This same image is evoked by Mrs. McCul-  
lers in describing Captain Penderton's drug-induced sleep:  
"This same quantity of the drug gave him a unique and voluptu-  
ous sensation; it was as though a great bird alighted on his  
chest, looked at him once with fierce, golden eyes, and  
stealthily enfolded him in his dark wings" (p. 57).

In the poem the speaker's desire to join the night-  
ingale ("And with thee fade away into the forest dim") is  
but a veiled longing for death, the journey into the forest  
representing the archetypal descent into the darker regions  
of the self. The same pattern occurs in Reflections in a  
Golden Eye, as Captain Penderton, astride the runaway Fire-  
bird, undertakes such a journey during which he plummets the  
depths of his very being, approaches the abyss and comes  
face to face with death itself. The experience is related  
as though it were an actual, physical occurrence; neverthe-  
less, it bears the irrational qualities of a dream in its  
quick, sudden movements and disjointedness, its fantastic  
happenings, its timelessness, and its obvious symbolic im-  
port. The experience is essentially an erotic one with  
first Firebird and then the soldier as the objects of the  
Captain's passion and rage.

The Captain's decision to ride his wife's horse is both impulsive and irrational and reflects his masochistic tendencies, since he not only dislikes riding, but is particularly frightened of Firebird. His behavior during the ride continues to be irrational and highly distraught; he gives the horse free rein and then suddenly pulls him in sharply, inflicting the same kind of penance and restriction on the horse he is accustomed to meting out to himself. The archetypal descent into hell is clearly discerned in the swift and sudden action of the horse who descends the sharp embankment almost killing the Captain with fright and leaving him badly bruised and dazed at the end of the descent. Throughout the harrowing ride he despairingly chants, "'I am lost.'" (p. 76).

And with those significant words, the Captain momentarily frees his soul and is transported, as though by some mystic force, to a realm of being far beyond the pale of ordinary human experience:

And having given up life, the Captain suddenly began to live. A great mad joy surged through him. This emotion, coming as unexpectedly as the plunge of the horse when he had broken away, was one that the Captain had never experienced. His eyes were glassy and half-open, as in delirium, but he saw suddenly as he had never seen before. The world was a kaleidoscope, and each of the multiple visions which he saw impressed itself on his mind with burning vividness. On the ground half-buried in the leaves there was a little flower, dazzling white and beautifully wrought. A thorny pine cone, the flight of a bird in the blue windy sky, a fiery shaft of sunshine in the green gloom--these the Captain saw as though for the first time in his life. He was conscious of the pure keen air and he felt the marvel of his own tense body, his laboring heart, and the miracle of blood, muscle, nerves, and bone. The

Captain knew no terror now; he had soared to that rare level of consciousness where the mystic feels that the earth is he and that he is the earth. Clinging crabwise to the runaway horse, there was a grin of rapture on his bloody mouth. (p. 76)

During his rapturous soaring, the Captain is buoyed by the sense of timelessness so characteristic of the mystical experience. Slowly and unwillingly, he descends to the level of physical awareness of his surroundings with the overriding dread that "'When this ends, all will be over for me'" (p. 77). What he fears is not death, for on this mad and exhilarating ride, he has dared to penetrate the heart of darkness. Rather, he dreads the return to his banal earthly existence.

Let down and completely frustrated by this sudden and unwelcome return to the mundane, he unmercifully beats the horse whom he ambiguously identifies as both the agent of his mystic transport and his bearer back to reality. For a time he loses consciousness, and upon awakening, he is astonished by the sight of the young soldier reclining nude against a nearby tree. He is completely mesmerized by the finely chiselled figure of the soldier, who possesses the classic grace and beauty of a Grecian statue. Overcome with passionate longing and rage, the sight renders him inarticulate:

He felt a rush of hatred for the soldier that was as exorbitant as the joy he had experienced on runaway Firebird. All the humiliations, the envies, and the fears of his life found vent in this great anger. The Captain stumbled to his feet and started blindly through the darkening woods.

He did not know where he was, or how far he had come from the post. His mind swarmed with a dozen



cunning schemes by which he could make the soldier suffer. In his heart the Captain knew this hatred, passionate as love, would be with him all the remaining days of his life. (p. 80)

But the passionate yearning and struggle within the Captain is so overpowering that even his return from the primeval journey into darkness to the prosaic reality of the stables does not dissipate it. The sight of the young soldier, completely clothed and performing his usual stable duties arouses his passion once more:

He looked at the fine, skillful hands and the tender roundness of the soldier's neck. The Captain was overcome by a feeling that both repelled and fascinated him--it was as though he and the young soldier were wrestling together naked, body to body, in a fight to death. The Captain's strained loin muscles were so weak that he could hardly stand. His eyes, beneath his twitching eyelids, were like blue burning flames. (p. 84)

Even as this final explosion of erotic passion subsides, the spell is broken, and the Captain is hearkened back to the mundane life on the post by the remembrance of his wife's party, for which he is already two hours late. This jolting realization leaves him in the same despondent mood as the speaker in Keats's poem, whose rapturous flight with the nightingale is suddenly interrupted by the beckoning of reality:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
 As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf.  
 Adieu! Adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
 In the next valley-glades:  
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
 Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?

The "waking dream" experienced in the idyllic forest, while it offers a mystical transport, does not consummate the erotic passion of Captain Penderton for the young soldier. Rather, it aggravates the passion and creates in both a yearning for that ultimate consummation achieved only through annihilation. The combined elements of forbidden passion, the destructive urge and finally death itself act in collusion to revive the "waking dream" and bring it to a shocking climax in Captain Penderton's murder of Private Williams.

The murder is an enigmatic act with ambiguous ramifications, since it marks the culminating triumph for Private Williams, the victim, and the ignominious defeat for Captain Penderton, the murderer. Both the bedroom and Leonora symbolize life and death--shunned by the Captain as the hated representation of vitality and life, and embraced by the Private as the welcomed reminder of death. It is small wonder that the Captain dallies so long after Alison's warning before investigating the intrusion. The murder is a welcomed act which frees the soul of the young soldier in his yearning to transcend, and at the same time a heinous act which condemns the Captain to his hateful terrestrial existence. Triumph and defeat are echoed in the closing lines of the novel:

The Captain had slumped against the wall. In his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk. Even in death the body of the soldier still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave face was unchanged, and his sun-browned hands lay palms upward on the carpet as though in sleep.  
(p. 140)

Despite his failure to transcend through death, the Captain is granted one final illuminating moment in which he foresees and understands the events about to occur: "In that vulnerable instant a kaleidoscope of half-guessed possibilities project themselves, and when the disaster had defined itself there is the feeling of having understood beforehand in some supernatural way. . . . He said to himself that he knew all. But what it was he knew he could not have expressed. He was only certain that this was the end" (p. 139). As in his previous mystical experience, the divine knowledge imparted to him renders him inarticulate.

The ineffability of the Captain's epiphany underscores the problem which lies at the heart of the novel--the expression of a level of reality which lies too deep for words or the usual channels of communication. We might at this point recall the introductory description of the "Sense of Dreadfulness" within the novel as an intuition which resists verbal communication. The irrational qualities of the novel--the heavy reliance on instinct and emotion, the dream-like tone, and the inability of the characters to think and act rationally, as well as their basic inarticulateness--all seem to indicate a level of reality that defies verbalization. This primeval dimension of reality is essentially lyrical and hence finds its most viable expression through the medium of art, thereby lending itself more appropriately to poetry rather than prose. And it is in this context that Reflections in a Golden Eye must be understood, for it is a

quasi-poem, a lyric in prose that takes the external form of the novel.

The analysis of this particular novel not only overwhelmingly confirms the general romantic sensibilities of the writer, whose imagination fastens on abstraction and grapples with the passion and darker side of human nature, but more specifically reveals the remarkable affinities her work shares with 19th century romantic poetry in its motifs of erotic love and the death wish. In the subsequent chapter we will pursue this notion of mixed genres to its logical culmination in The Ballad of the Sad Café where tale, ballad, and romance are uniquely intertwined in a bizarre, but poignant story of unrequited love.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFE: A MODERN TALE OF UNREQUITED LOVE

Reflections in a Golden Eye was followed by the publication of the novella, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in 1943.<sup>1</sup> Critics are quick to note the striking affinities of these two works, both of which represent a radical departure from the form and style of the conventional novel and an excursion into the world of image and symbol. Although Reflections in a Golden Eye has never been highly regarded by critics, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe has been highly praised for such romantic qualities as its complete objectification of myth, its use of the ingenious hybrid form of the prose ballad, and its fabulous or legendary style.<sup>2</sup> Its success as a work of art is owing to certain indigenous qualities--its objectivity, its distillation of action, its brevity, its controlled dramatic build-up--which are largely the result of this highly successful experimentation with genres, infusing prose with the mood and music of poetry and creating

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<sup>1</sup> The Ballad of the Sad Cafe appeared in periodical form in 1943, in hardback in 1951, in paperback in 1958, and as a Broadway play by Edward Albee in 1963-64.

<sup>2</sup> The World We Imagine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), p. 282.

out of that synthesis a literary ballad in prose.

This interplay of myth and romance and the fusion of poetic and prose genres are of paramount importance to the proper understanding of the novella. Pursuing this notion, Joseph R. Millichap in his recent study of The Ballad of the Sad Café examines the concept of the literary ballad and its application to this work.<sup>3</sup> Both Hassan and Schorer peripherally point out the qualities of the ballad inherent in the novella, but Millichap is the first to undertake a thorough exploration of the work as a serious development in this genre. He notes that the build-up and development of the central dramatic situation which culminates in an epic-like battle faithfully adheres to the traditional structure and plotting of the literary ballad.

The article carefully examines a number of other key elements indigenous to the ballad which are conspicuously present in the novella. The setting of The Ballad of the Sad Café is vague and imprecise, with a faraway quality that strongly hints at isolation and timelessness: "Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Carson McCullers' Literary Ballad," Georgia Review, 27 (Fall 1973), 329-39. The next two or three paragraphs will entail a general discussion of Millichap's study, and only reasonably lengthy quotations (of five words or more) will be expressly footnoted.

<sup>4</sup> The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 3. Subsequent quotations from the novella cited from this edition by page number within chapter.

Millichap's description of this "romantic wasteland where piney woods and swamps counterpoint the stunning heat of August afternoons" is right on dead center.<sup>5</sup> He further emphasizes the affinity between the Southern hinterlands and the Scottish border country, the traditional setting of the ballad.

In addition to the significance of the setting, Millichap points out the implied use of ballad-maker or balladeer as narrator (a role which is more fully implemented in the play version), the use of superstitious lore, and the reliance on popular folk types for characters, this latter a point pursuant with our own interests. He notes that with her magical cures and potent homebrew, Miss Amelia is a kind of white or benevolent witch. Marvin Macy, her husband, is the stereotypical "bad guy" or as more vividly described by Millichap, the "demon lover," the "Hades of Dixie." Lymon, on the other hand, with his love of fun and spectacle, belongs to that group of miniature mischief-makers which includes fairies, sprites and leprechauns.

This tendency to regard the main characters as literary or folk types and larger-than-life figures, is by no means unique in Millichap's study. It is a viable approach that has been adopted by a number of critics consistent with their attempt to discern mythic patterns in the novella as a way of getting at the crux of the matter, the peculiar triangular love-hate relationship that exists between the three

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<sup>5</sup> "Carson McCullers' Literary Ballad," p. 330.

principals, Miss Amelia, the manly giantess; Marvin Macy, her villainous husband; and Cousin Lymon, Amelia's dwarfish kinsman. Robert Phillips, who approaches the story as a parable, looks for clues to the triangular affair in the word-play connoted by the names of the characters. In his analysis of the name and character of Amelia, he points out that both the Latin roots indicating Love and meliorism are significant indications of her role as lover and seeker of better things. He further notes that Amelia transcribed in German has its roots in the verb "to work," an appropriate etymology for the name of a woman who is by nature a hard worker and a ruthless aggressor. In turning to the name Lymon, he finds a significant connection between the name and the character's use of a lime-green shawl, the gift of Miss Amelia. Like the shawl, Lymon himself is but a feminine accessory, a treasured ornament for Miss Amelia. He then breaks the name down syllabically into "lie-man," thereby connoting the passivity of Lymon, who is the object of Miss Amelia's love, her beloved.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar exploration, Albert Griffith sees at work in The Ballad of the Sad Café the forces of the mythic imagination forging a new modern myth. He views Amelia as the "bucolic Vesta," the towering figure to whom the townsmen pay homage by their steady patronage at her combination store-café. In the handsome but disreputable figure of Mar-

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<sup>6</sup> "Painful Love, Carson McCullers' Parable," Southwest Review, 51 (Winter 1966), pp. 80-86.



vin Macy, he finds a number of analogues, most notably Adonis and Orpheus, since this guitar-strumming reprobate has been to the underworld of the penitentiary. In the gnomish little hunchback Cousin Lymon, he (like Millichap) sees the impish prankster so popular in classical myth and fairy tale and accordingly supplies a number of possible analogues from a variety of cultures including Rumpelstiltskin, Haephestus, the Harpies, Loki, and even the Wandering Jew, a source suggested by his mysterious origins and nomadic style of life.<sup>7</sup>

This mythic or archetypal approach to The Ballad of the Sad Café invariably leads us to conclude that the work itself assumes the shape of a romance, or more specifically, a romance-ballad in prose, if we are to preserve the substantial evidence of the latter provided by Millichap's study. The ballad and the romance are two very congenial, and often overlapping, genres which developed almost simultaneously; and while the ballad suggests style and method of presentation in Mrs. McCullers' work, the romance suggests substance, that is, matters concerning love.

Phillips readily acknowledges that it belongs to the tradition of Romance as defined by Hawthorne in his famous Preface to The House of the Seven Gables.<sup>8</sup> Taking a cue from his observation, we might profit from a re-examination of the opening statements of the Preface in which he draws a

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<sup>7</sup> "Carson McCullers' Myth of the Sad Café," Georgia Review, 21 (Spring 1967), pp. 46-56.

<sup>8</sup> "Painful Love," p. 84.

clear-cut distinction between the objective and method of the romance and that of the novel:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and, especially to mingle the Marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the Public.

As Hawthorne suggests, Mrs. McCullers lays forth her full claim to this "certain latitude" which entitles her imagination to expand, exaggerate and at times even distort the literalness of the truth. The outlandish appearances and behavior of the principal characters alone is sufficient evidence of this poetic license. Marvin Macy is meaner than mean; he even smells mean. Miss Amelia is manlier than any man with a reputation as the most vicious and most successful pugilist around. And Cousin Lymon is the most persnickety person imaginable, who finds fault with everything; he even complains to Amelia that his grits are cooked too quickly on the outside and are too underdone on the inside.

In addition, Lymon's undisputed reputation as the town's resident tall-tale teller is reflective of Mrs. McCul-

lers' own taste for the "Marvellous" in the novella. All events assume the import of extraordinary happenings and are heightened by sudden and dramatic signs and changes in nature or in the behavior of the characters themselves. Marvin Macy, who has been a vile, hateful person all his life (even as a boy, he carried "the dried and salted ear of a man he had killed in a razor fight," p. 27) is miraculously reformed by his love for Miss Amelia. Aside from his astounding transformation of character, he possesses other unnatural traits and powers. He never sweats, "not even in August." When he finally returns to seek his revenge from Miss Amelia, the weather becomes unseasonably hot and heavy with the smell of spoiling pork.

An event which provokes as much excitement and speculation as the dreaded return of Macy is the sudden and mysterious appearance of Cousin Lymon from out of nowhere with a most unlikely claim to kinship with Miss Amelia. Instead of chasing him off her property, which is what the townsmen expect her to do at the very least, she offers him a free drink of her special homebrew and takes him in. Her incredible display of humanity arouses so much suspicion that the next day when she fails to appear a fantastic rumor circulates that she has murdered the hunchback to obtain the goods in his dilapidated suitcase.

But the romantic elements depicted in Mrs. McCullers' prose ballad exceed the boundaries of the arbitrary definition proposed by Hawthorne, whose notion of the romance con-

centrates on its departure from verisimilitude: "the book (The House of the Seven Gables) may be read strictly as a Romance, having a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead, than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex."

The Ballad of the Sad Café adheres to the criteria of the traditional romance not only in its imaginary flights from reality, but in matters of substance, for it contains the essential elements of courtly love, out of which the medieval romance arose. Like the relationship between Miss Amelia, Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon, courtly love is basically a triangular affair. There are the lovers, Tristan and Isolde, and there is also a third and unwelcome party, the husband, who serves simultaneously and paradoxically as both the impetus to and the obstruction of their passion. Here, more than in any of her other novels, the pattern of courtly love is most nearly approximated, for we have the conspicuous presence of that third party. The Lymon-Amelia romance is quite clearly an implied adulterous affair, for she is still married to Marvin Macy when she takes Lymon in and literally gives him her absent husband's bed.

The story is neatly divided into two sections, the first of which is concerned with the romance that develops between Amelia and Lymon. At midpoint Marvin Macy appears and we witness both the rapid deterioration of the Amelia-Lymon romance, and the blossoming of the romantic but unholy alliance between Lymon and Macy which is directed toward the

ultimate destruction of the cast-off lover, Amelia. In the first half we are introduced to the masculine giantess who fears neither man nor God nor beast and to her paramour, an impish cripple, weak and cowardly by nature, but who in some mysterious way holds sway over the Amazon. What strikes the reader immediately about this outlandish pair, who are completely opposite in every way, is that their romantic roles have been completely reversed so that what we have in effect is an inversion, or parody, if you will, of courtly love with the woman in hot pursuit as lover, while the male assumes the passive role of object or beloved.

In this connection we might note the similarity between the name Lymon and the word Leman which in medieval courtly love refers to the mistress. The leman prostitutes herself to the lover who in his eagerness to please and win the affection of his beloved coaxes her with gifts and palatable delicacies. Similarly Lymon is pampered and placated beyond reason by the lovesick, adoring Amelia. He is given her most delectable home-brew and her cherished enamel snuff-box. In short, anything she owns is his, for the asking--or the taking. Moreover, he is regularly treated to a rub down with pot liquor to preserve his frail health. Everything about him suggests femininity from his finicky appetite to his frivolous dress.

With his gay and gregarious manner, Lymon quickly establishes himself as the bucolic prima donna of the cafe in contrast with the taciturn Amelia who serves as owner-

manager. In keeping with the masculine role which she assumes, her attire consists of overalls which facilitate her daily chores of hunting, farming and tending the still. Unlike her wan beloved, she has the stamina and appetite of a plow horse. Nor is she given to frivolity, for hers is the most spartan bedroom in the house while Lymon's is the most elegant. Basically an aggressive, shrewd business person, she is the obvious breadwinner in this peculiar romantic alliance.

Below the surface of this give-all-take-all romance lurks the dark shadow of Amelia's estranged husband and the terrifying possibility that he will make good his threat to seek vengeance from her for her brutal rejection of his love. Six years after the arrival of Lymon, he does indeed return to exact retribution from his unfaithful wife. It is at this point that the characters shift roles in the triangle of courtly love, so that Lymon embraces the role of Tristan with Macy cast as a most unwilling and uncooperative Isolde and Miss Amelia consigned to the third-party role of cast-off lover.

Lymon's heartless rejection of Miss Amelia casts him in the familiar role of "la belle dame sans merci." One cannot help but recall Keats's wistful ballad of the same name, for like some wild and unnatural changeling or fairy child, Lymon lures the warrior-like Amelia into the web of love and then cruelly deserts her leaving her lonely and despairing in a setting that reeks of stagnation and decay and

is strongly suggestive of the romantic wasteland in which Keats's "Knight at arms" finds himself:

O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the Lake  
And no birds sing!

In the same opportunistic way that Miss Amelia first uses and then abuses Macy's love for her, Cousin Lymon betrays her esteem and affection for him by falling in love with her wastrel husband. Shortly after Macy's arrival in town, the little hunchback confronts him in what can only be described as one of the most ludicrous seduction scenes in all literature:

The hunchback stood at the end of the pit, his pale face lighted by the soft glow from the smoldering oak fire. Cousin Lymon had a very peculiar accomplishment, which he used whenever he wished to ingratiate himself with someone. He would stand very still, and with just a little concentration, he could wiggle his large pale ears with marvelous quickness and ease. This trick he always used when he wanted to get something special out of Miss Amelia, and to her it was irresistible. Now as he stood there the hunchback's ears were wiggling furiously on his head, but it was not Miss Amelia at whom he was looking this time. The hunchback was smiling at Marvin Macy with an entreaty that was near to desperation. At first Marvin Macy paid no attention to him, and when he did finally glance at the hunchback it was without any appreciation whatsoever.

'What ails this Brokeback?' he asked with a rough jerk of his thumb.

No one answered. And Cousin Lymon, seeing that his accomplishment was getting him nowhere, added new efforts of persuasion. He fluttered his eyelids, so that they were like pale, trapped moths in his sockets. He scraped his feet around on the ground, waved his hands about, and finally began doing a little trotlike dance. In the last gloomy light of the winter afternoon he resembled the child of a swamphaunt. (pp. 49-50).

Lymon's infatuation with Macy emphasizes the basic

attractiveness of evil, for Macy is depicted as evil incarnate. He smokes marijuana, he robs, he kills; he has even been to the penitentiary. For all these enviable experiences, Lymon finds him a figure worthy of hero worship. He trails him around like a lovesick puppy, unaffected by the scornful derision with which his loyalty and affection are met. He pines away with longing at even the briefest separation from his beloved Macy, and to insure their togetherness, invites him to live at Miss Amelia's, adding insult to injury and thereby provoking the violent, but inevitable confrontation in which Macy publicly challenges his wife's supremacy.

Both these romantic relationships demonstrate overwhelmingly that erotic love is a devastating force capable of violence and destruction. As de Rougemont points out, and as has been repeatedly demonstrated in previous chapters, it is an unconscious expression of the death wish, a contention indisputably borne out in the two courtships under consideration. Initially, the relationship between Miss Amelia and Lymon has a beneficial effect on the morale of the townspeople, as well as on the town's depressed economy. Out of Miss Amelia's love for the hunchback is born the cafe, which rekindles the formerly dormant sense of communion among the townsfolk.

Below the surface of fellowship and conviviality, there is at work a destructive force in the person of the prankster Lymon, who in his own way is as malignant as Mar-



vin Macy. Hassan accurately describes him as "an unholy trophy of man's eternal struggle with Evil, with Death itself, which is the negation of Love."<sup>9</sup> The little hunchback takes malicious delight in setting up squabbles between relatives and close friends alienating them from one another. Such is the case with the Rainey twins between whom he induces a petty quarrel which results in their permanent estrangement.

He, of course, is the catalyst that provokes the fight between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy. And when the fight itself occurs, a bloody contest fought over the love and loyalty of the beguiling urchin, it is Lymon who is responsible for the ignominious defeat of Miss Amelia. Just as she is about to claim victory, he springs to Macy's rescue, like some devilish Harpy: "Yet at the instant Miss Amelia grasped the throat of Marvin Macy the hunchback sprang forward and sailed through the air as though he had grown hawk wings. He landed on the broad strong back of Miss Amelia and clutched at her neck with his clawed little fingers" (p. 68).

As though this public contumely were not enough, Lymon and the hunchback systematically set about to destroy her property and to poison Miss Amelia as well and then vanish into the night taking with them the last hopes for resurrecting the communal spirit of the town. What we see in the

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<sup>9</sup> Radical Innocence (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 225.

novella is the cyclical effect spelled out so aptly in the perpetual changing of seasons in the town. We see the rise and demise of the cafe, the birth and death of a town. As Malin observes, the "festive gathering" in The Ballad of the Sad Café becomes potentially destructive, the scene in which violence invariably explodes.<sup>10</sup>

Although violence and destruction pervade the atmosphere, it would be unfair to characterize Cousin Lymon as the sole destructive force in the story. Miss Amelia herself is prone to violence and has gained some notoriety because she once beat a lawyer to a pulp for trying to swindle her. Basically a vindictive person, she attempts on several occasions to murder Marvin Macy, but bungles it every time. Macy's destructive instinct is of course overtly manifest in his criminality, but it is also subtly and symbolically alluded to in his penchant for marijuana which he carried "to tempt those who were discouraged and drawn toward death" (p. 28).

With the exception of the tragic outcome of the fight between Amelia and Macy, much of the impact of violence and destruction is dissipated by its exaggerated presentation in terms of folk humor and situation comedy, often with a slapstick effect. One of Miss Amelia's numerous attempts to murder her husband backfires and nearly results in her own death when she gets the poisoned plate that was intended for

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<sup>10</sup> New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 20.

him. Cousin Lymon's attempts to set friends at odds is dubbed mischief-making. And much of Marvin Macy's "bad guy" activity is lightly scoffed at, particularly his deflowering of young virgins. This humorous treatment of violence seems to bear out the contention of Leslie Fiedler that the "bugaboos" in American literature are to be taken as jokes, whether it's the headless horseman or Pap dead on the houseboat in a cabin scrawled with obscenities.<sup>11</sup>

This unlikely mixing of comedy and horror is part of a consistent, emerging pattern in the novella in which images and symbols incorporating anti-theses, contradictions and disparities suggest the absence of harmony and integration in the relationships of the characters as well as within the characters themselves. Most of these images suggest fragmentation or disjuncture, and they occur in halves or pairs pointing up the Platonic predisposition of the writer, particularly with reference to the Symposium in which Aristophanes recounts the story of the division of man by Zeus and man's eternal search to be reunited with his other half. There are innumerable examples of such images which point up this notion of the dual components of the self. One of the most striking of these is the image of Miss Amelia's "two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (p. 4). Like the twisted eye-beams of

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<sup>11</sup> Love and Death in the American Novel, Rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), pp. 26-27.

Donne's lovers in "The Ecstasy," the crossed eyes reflect the tension created by yearning, frustrated passion.

The notion that Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon are half-beings who possess disjointed personalities is substantiated by Lymon's explanation of their kinship. He claims that their mothers were "half-sisters"; in effect, the offspring of each half-sister is a half-self. Further evidence of their respective aberrant personalities is suggested by the imbalance of the male and female components of the psyche; Amelia's personality is dominantly masculine, while Lymon's is dominantly feminine. In effect, Amelia's personality is dominated by the animus, Jung's term for the male personification of the female's unconscious, while Lymon's personality is dominated by the anima, the female personification of the male's unconscious.<sup>12</sup>

The qualities attributable to the anima or feminine component of the psyche such as temperamental and irrational behavior, instinctual and intuitive perceptions, and extreme sensitivity toward nature are readily discernible in the little hunchback. Mrs. McCullers' description of Lymon as an extraordinary human being is remarkably similar to Jung's description of the anima:

There is a type of person who has a quality about him that sets him apart from other and more ordinary human beings. Such a person has an instinct which

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<sup>12</sup> Man and His Symbols (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), p. 186. The continued discussion of the anima and the animus is based on Jung's analysis from pp. 186-207 of the cited work and will be footnoted only if directly quoted.

is usually found only in small children, an instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world. Certainly the hunchback was of this type. (p. 20)

The male figure dominated by the anima has been influenced by the mother to such a degree that certain weaknesses, fears and aberrations are inbred in the personality. Chief among these are effeminacy, dependency, sentimentality, and the fear of disease, impotence and accidents. Lymon's personality is generally characterized by this description. He is physically and emotionally weak, dependent on the generosity of others, specifically Miss Amelia, and is deeply fearful of solitude, darkness and death.

Miss Amelia is easily perceived as the embodiment of the animus, the male personification within the unconscious. The necessity of addressing her by the title Miss serves to remind the townsmen and the reader that despite her mannish ways she bears the outward vestiges of a woman. Unlike the anima which is basically influenced by the mother, the animus is shaped by the father. Amelia is motherless, having been reared by her father, who, like her, was a solitary person. That her father must have exercised a powerful influence over her personality and her convictions is evidenced by the fact that she is unwilling to speak of him to anyone but Lymon. Out of fear or some equally compelling reason, she venerates the memory of "Big Papa." Her most precious possessions are those associated with his memory, his enamel snuffbox and an acorn she picked up on the day of his death.

Jung tells us that "the father endows his daughter's

animus with the special coloring of unarguable, incontestably 'true' convictions--convictions that never include the personal reality of the woman herself as she actually is."<sup>13</sup>

No doubt Amelia's penchant for shrewd, calculated bargaining and for fights of any kind (litigative as well as physical) is the result of masculine parental influence. According to Jung one of the four stages of development in the animus is the personification of physical power through the image of the "muscle man." Amelia is inordinately proud of her physical strength and prowess, often flexing her muscle out of sheer nervous habit. Like any professional fighter, she takes her training seriously and begins a rigorous workout with her punching bag in preparation for her upcoming fight with Marvin Macy.

Bent on shunning the reality of her womanhood in ways other than her display of brute physical strength, Amelia, the self-appointed physician of the community, refuses to treat patients with female disorders. At the mere mention of such complaints, she blushes; they serve as unpleasant reminders of her own womanliness which she obstinately denies. Among the other negative qualities which Jung associates with the animus is the passion for empty talk. Mrs. McCullers describes the subjects which interested Miss Amelia as interminable. In explaining Amelia's approach to her conversations with Lymon, she says, "Miss Amelia always kept to the broad, rambling generalities of the matter, going on end-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

lessly in a low, thoughtful voice and getting nowhere--while Cousin Lymon would interrupt her suddenly to pick up, magpie fashion, some detail which, even if unimportant, was at least concrete and bearing on some practical facet close at hand" (p. 36).

Despite the fact that Amelia and Lymon function as partners who ideally (as opposites) should complement one another, there is an ever-growing tension in their relationship. In this case unity between anima and animus is an impossibility, and the two halves of the self remain disjointed. Thus the characters are spiritually as well as physically grotesque. Love becomes a struggle between the masculine and feminine elements in the personality with the animus seeking to tyrannize and the anima strongly resisting. The explosive tension resulting from a forced union of the two is prefigured in the distorted shadow created by Amelia and Lymon as they ascend the stairs on the first night of his arrival: "The hunchback hovered so close behind her that the swinging light made on the staircase wall one great, twisted shadow of the two of them" (p. 12).

Aside from the disjunct relationship of Lymon and Amelia, there are still other reminders of this basic duality of the self and the need for harmony and integration from within. There is the old couple who appear at the cafe one Saturday night: "They had lived together so long, this old country couple, that they looked as similar as twins. They were brown, shriveled, and like two little walking pea-

nuts" ( p. 42). In contrast with the compatible union of these two half-selves, we are presented with the once inseparable Rainey twins, whose harmonious relationship has been destroyed by the devilish work of Cousin Lymon.

The most telling image of the disjunct self, however, is the "cracked" house into which Miss Amelia withdraws after Cousin Lymon deserts her. Much has been made of the house as symbol of the self in modern literature, and Malin is quick to note its particular significance in the New American Gothic writers. He finds the house is a contemporary variation of the Gothic haunted castle and psychologically translates into the private world into which the protagonists of this literature typically withdraw.<sup>14</sup>

Here again it is interesting to note that elements of the medieval romance are manifest in the house itself which bears a remarkable resemblance to the medieval castle. Located in the center of the town, it is the largest, most imposing edifice and is central to the town's economy because it houses the store, the cafe and the doctor's office. Since Miss Amelia practically owns the town and all the surrounding property, she is in effect the ruler or feudal lord whose erratic exercise of noblesse oblige can make or break the fortunes of the townsfolk. When she retires into her castle after her beloved quits her, the town becomes a veritable economic and spiritual wasteland, like that of Eliot's fisher King whose sexual impotence parallels Miss Amelia's

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<sup>14</sup> New American Gothic, p. 79.



own failure with Eros:

Yes, the town is dreary. On August afternoons the road is empty, white with dust, and the sky above is bright as glass. Nothing moves--there are no children's voices, only the hum of the mill. The peach trees seem to grow more crooked every summer, and the leaves are dull gray and of a sickly delicacy. The house of Miss Amelia leans so much to the right that it is now only a question of time when it will collapse completely, and people are careful not to walk around the yard. There is no good liquor to be bought in the town; the nearest is such that those who drink it grow warts on their livers the size of goobers, and dream themselves into a dangerous inward world. There is absolutely nothing to do in the town. Walk around the millpond, stand kicking at a rotten stump, figure out what you can do with the old wagon wheel by the side of the road near the church. The soul rots with boredom. You might as well go down to the Forks Falls highway and listen to the chain gang. (pp. 70-71)

The castle-like house of Miss Amelia functions as the "charged image" of the story according to Madden, an image that significantly appears at both the beginning and the conclusion. The introductory description is particularly revealing: "There is about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one time, and long ago, the right side of the front porch had been painted, and part of the wall--but the painting was left unfinished and one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other" (p. 3). Much later we are told that Cousin Lymon is responsible for the "curious, cracked look" of the house because on the day of Miss Amelia's match with Marvin Macy, he impulsively began painting the front porch, succeeding only in painting the right half before the paint ran out. The implication of this incomplete act is all too clear; it further underscores his inability as a fragmented soul to

achieve self-completion or fulfillment.

Few critics forego the opportunity to comment on the significance of the half-painted house. Baldanza calls it a testament to Mrs. McCullers' "morbid preoccupation with sub-lunar imperfection."<sup>15</sup> The dark-light halves of the porch are altogether consistent with the dichotomous imagery that pervades the story. In Manichaeian terms, they serve as a poignant reminder of body and soul and the eternal struggle of the soul to flee its bodily confinement. Like the struggling soul, the innately deficient half-self epitomized by Miss Amelia is similarly denied transcendence and doomed to terrestrial confinement and thus withdraws defensively into its own inner world voluntarily consigning itself to a solitary existence.

At the conclusion of the story, however, the reader is left with something more promising than the abject despair reflected in the withdrawal of Miss Amelia. Juxtaposed to this powerful image of solipsism is that of the chain gang significantly placed outside the lonely town on the Fork Falls Highway, which comes to symbolize the outer world of hope from which Miss Amelia has extricated herself. The solidarity of the chain gang becomes the preferable alternative to the solipsism of Miss Amelia. This view is at least implicitly substantiated by the writer herself in a brief commentary on the story in "The Flowering Dream" (and to which we alluded in the first chapter) in which she explains that

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<sup>15</sup> "Plato in Dixie," Georgia Review 12 (1958), p. 151.

her objective in the story was to juxtapose Eros and Agape in an attempt to point up the latter as a superior form of love.<sup>16</sup> To further reinforce the harmonious comradeship of the prisoners, their voices swell in song, a song which paradoxically serves as a recapitulation of the theme of unrequited love and at the same time symbolizes the most sublime expression of the soul's longing for transcendence.

The music of "the twelve mortal men" comprising the chain gang is described as a "phrase, half-sung, and like a question"; and it resounds as though it were the very music of the spheres:

The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence. (pp. 71-72).

Evans says of the chain gang that "the twelve mortal men represent, of course, all mankind, and they are prisoners because they cannot escape the universal fate of spiritual isolation. There is paradox and irony in the fact that what joins them together is exactly what keeps them apart: that is, the predicament of their loneliness."<sup>17</sup> Hassan argues that the lyrical impulse of the prisoners is in essence an

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<sup>16</sup> The Mortgaged Heart (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 319.

<sup>17</sup> "Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," New World Writing, I (1952), p. 310.

expression of the death wish, since the voice of the chain gang is often interpreted as the envoy or refrain of this tale of unrequited love.<sup>18</sup> There is in this ballad, if not in all ballads, an inherent paradox, a contradiction between form and theme. By its very nature as a poetic lyric, the ballad implies transcendence; yet the story which it recounts is one of frustrated passion and unfulfilled love. The refrain, in this case the song of the chain gang, serves as a consolation which attempts to resolve or at least diminish the dissonance that has preceded it.

In this chapter we have seen the mythic imagination at work forging a ballad of unrequited love into the form of contemporary novel or novella. We have once again witnessed the virtuosity with which Mrs. McCullers fuses poetic and prose genres and with which she interweaves the motifs of selfish and unselfish love. We will next consider The Member of the Wedding, which, in much the same fashion as The Ballad of the Sad Cafe,<sup>1</sup> relies on the writer's Manichaeian feeling for dualities and dichotomies expressed in terms of light and dark symbols in order to delineate the allegorical function of the child coming of age in America.

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<sup>18</sup> "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Modern Fiction Studies, 5 (Winter 1959-60), p. 314.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CHILD AS AMERICAN ADAM IN THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

In 1946 The Member of the Wedding was published, a novel which has since come to mark the apex of Carson McCullers' literary career. A radical departure from the malaise of Reflections in a Golden Eye and The Ballad of the Sad Café, it nevertheless reveals the writer's persistent preoccupation with abstraction and myth which in this case assumes the form of a contemporary allegory based on America's coming of age. The novel should be viewed as an exploration of the ambiguities underlying the child or adolescent protagonist who haunts the pages of American fiction from Robin Molineux and Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield and Portnoy.

Apropos of this, Fiedler observes, "In this sense, our novels seem not primitive, perhaps, but innocent, unfallen in a disturbing way, almost juvenile. The great works of American fiction are notoriously at home in the children's section of the library, their level of sentimentality precisely that of a pre-adolescent."<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of The Member of the Wedding, but it is equally true

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<sup>1</sup> Love and Death in the American Novel, Rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), p. 24.

that on the figurative level the child becomes the prime symbol of American innocence falling into knowledge, ultimately the symbol of America itself and its own painful adolescence. In his classic study on 19th century American fiction, R. W. B. Lewis notes the emergence of a mythic hero, peculiarly American, who becomes the embodiment "of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history," the Adamic figure.<sup>2</sup> He further contends that contemporary American literature retains the vestiges of the Adamic tradition in the work of novelists who maintain "a comic or ironic perspective" and "who have escaped what I have called the arrested development of innocence and the premature old age of an absorption with sin."<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. McCullers is one of those rare novelists of whom he speaks, and Frankie Addams, her adolescent heroine in The Member of the Wedding, is the embodiment of the contemporary American Adam as the seeker of knowledge of good and evil through both intuitive and empirical means. This thesis is further borne out by the author's coincidental choice of the all-American surname, Addams. As an adolescent tomboy, she is the ideal representation of the American innocent, the composite embodiment of American maleness and femaleness. Her growth from innocence to knowledge is patently manifested in her three phases of development from Frankie, the tomboy,

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<sup>2</sup> The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

to F. Jasmine, romantic ingenue, to Frances, the young adult.

Frankie is a variation of Mick Kelly, a tall gangling girl-boy with a vivid imagination and artistic aspirations, whose insecurities and frustrations frequently vent themselves in violence. Despite the symbolic implications underlying the adolescent protagonist, Frankie is a believable character, warmly human and lovable. One can scarcely help but wonder if Mrs. McCullers, like Faulkner whose endearing image of the little girl with muddy drawers was the genesis of The Sound and the Fury, was seized by some poignant image of childhood which flowered into The Member of the Wedding.

There are unmistakable autobiographical overtones here as in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in the child artist figure, and Schorer believes that the autobiographical image which the author recounts in "The Flowering Dream" is the controlling "illusion" nurtured by Frankie, the notion of some wonderful party which she longs to join but to which she has not been invited:<sup>4</sup>

When I was a child of about four, I was walking with my nurse past a convent. For once, the convent doors were open. And I saw the children eating ice-cream cones, playing on iron swings, and I watched, fascinated. I wanted to go in, but my nurse said no, I was not Catholic. The next day, the gate was shut. But, year by year, I thought of what was going on, of this wonderful party, where I was shut out. I wanted to climb the wall, but I was too little. I beat on the wall once, and I knew all the time that there was a marvelous party going on, but I couldn't get in.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The World We Imagine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), p. 281.

<sup>5</sup> The Mortgaged Heart (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 311.

There can be little doubt that Mrs. McCullers was closer emotionally to this novel and to Frankie herself than to any other of her novels and characters. Her sister acknowledges that to her family and friends Frankie seemed most like the author.<sup>6</sup> On a recording in which Mrs. McCullers reads excerpts from her works, she includes the famed "we of me" passage from the production of The Member of the Wedding. At the conclusion of that powerful reading, her voice trembles as she is overwhelmed by emotion. She seems to have struggled more with this novel than with any other single piece of writing, perhaps as a result of these strong emotional ties. In correspondence with her husband at the time of its writing, she acknowledges the difficulties with the novel which she tended to view as a prose poem.<sup>7</sup> In a retrospective interview granted some time after its publication, she confirmed the apparently apocryphal story that it had taken her one year to write the first paragraph: "But still, as I told you, the first paragraph took me one whole year, to get just the rhythm of the language, the poetry, and what I wanted to do."<sup>8</sup>

Although the novel was well received by most critics, Eisinger casually dismisses it as but another of her books

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> "The Marquis Interviews Carson McCullers," p. 20. This article can be found in the public library in Nyack, New York. Further documentation on it was unavailable.



on the trials of female adolescence.<sup>9</sup> But Frankie Addams is not just another child figure, for there is sufficient depth to her character to make her one of the most enigmatic children in all American fiction. Her behavior is so consistently impulsive and irrational that we tend to look beyond the superficialities of childish petulance and regard her as some symbol of the darker, irrational forces at work in the universe and in human nature. A secret sin with the neighbor's son, a petty theft, a sordid rendezvous with a soldier, an outrageously provocative evening dress, a predisposition to violence, a post-adolescent concern with death--these are the associations we have with Frankie, and they all point to something beyond the mere portrayal of a child growing up in a small town in the South. Rather she should be viewed as a composite descendant of Hawthorne's protagonists, Young Goodman Brown and Robin Molineux--as a kind of male-female Everyman coming of age in America. Like Young Goodman Brown, she undergoes an essentially erotic experience, not in the New England forest but in the jungle of modern society, and gains knowledge of evil and the dark forces at work in man's soul. In the same way that Hawthorne's protagonist undergoes the symbolic transformation from Young Goodman Brown to Goodman Brown, Mrs. McCullers' protagonist begins as Frankie and emerges as Frances with a more acute awareness of her own identity and the forces that shape her.

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<sup>9</sup> Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 255-56.

What shocks Young Goodman Brown in his sojourn into the forest is the sight of his wife Faith's pink ribbons and her possible association with the evil he witnesses. She is in effect a reflection of himself, a part of his own soul, and the discovery of her propensity for evil is tantamount to the discovery of the evil that lurks within his own soul. Similarly in The Member of the Wedding, various forms of reflections of the self assume significance as the controlling images and symbols. The favorite metaphysical images of eyes, mirrors and spheres are pervasive and depict reflections of the dichotomous nature of the soul containing both darkness and light, good and evil.

These are the vast, all encompassing polarities which divide the universe as well as the soul of man, and thus Frankie's tormented, "unjoined" soul becomes a kind of microcosm which reflects the condition of the world. Her vision of the world as "cracked and loose" and turning very fast is simply a reflection of the fragmentation of her own soul. Her attempt to be at one with the world is an outward manifestation of her effort to restore order and harmony to her troubled soul. She perceives that the way in which this is done is to search out the bits and pieces of her being which are strewn out across the universe. This "romance with the world," as Hassan describes her burning desire to commingle with the universe is, at bottom, a romance with the self.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Radical Innocence (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 219.

Sensing her fragmentation from the universe, she is obsessed with the notion of belonging, of joining and becoming a member of various groups--of the neighborhood club, of the wedding and finally of the world itself. All of this is expressed as the desire to find the "we of me," to identify with something outside the self and achieve a collective identity, rather than the usual distinguishing "I" or individual identity so indigenous to romantic literature. Her dreams of faraway places and heroic achievements are part of this attempt to discover herself through identification with the universe. As part of her contribution to the war effort, she wants to donate her blood so that it will course through the veins of soldiers all over the world. In fact, the whole notion of the war has her romantically enthralled as an attempt, destructive though it is, to unite the fragmented universe in a common bond, a reflection of Frankie's own subconscious desire to unite the bits and pieces of her soul.

She hungers for contact with every particle of nature because she sees her reflection in everything and senses some mystical "connection" between herself and the outside world. Like the tramp in "A Tree-a Rock-a Cloud," she is a lover who wants to embrace the world and who feels the compulsion to verbally express that inexplicable feeling. Balanza compares Frankie and her irrational "connection" with the universe, not only to the tramp in her short story, but to Walt Whitman and to Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, who

also feel mystically drawn to the flux about them.<sup>11</sup>

Frankie's attraction to the universe can be explained in terms of the polarities that divide the forces to which she is drawn. The characters with whom she comes in contact tend to epitomize these polarities of darkness and light and are easily grouped into her black friends and her white friends and family. The circle of her black acquaintances includes Berenice Sadie Brown, the Addams family's motherly cook and housekeeper; Honey Brown, Berenice's half brother; and Big Mama, their fortune teller mother--all of whom exert a powerful appeal to the irrational side of Frankie's nature and in some way mirror her own darker self. The psychological make-up of both Frankie and Honey is remarkably similar. Both are restless seekers, fragmented beings in search of self definition which will make them whole. (The description of Honey as Berenice's half-brother strongly suggests his fragmented nature.) In the opening paragraph, Frankie is described as an "unjoined person." When Big Mama speaks to Frankie of Honey, she explains in her homespun philosophical way that he is an unfinished person: "The Creator, Big Mama said, had withdrawn his hand from him too soon, so that he was left eternally unsatisfied."<sup>12</sup> Honey experiences a feeling of psychological suffocation outwardly manifested by the social entrapment and restriction which are the result of

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<sup>11</sup> "Plato in Dixie," Georgia Review 12 (1958), pp. 160-61.

<sup>12</sup> The Member of the Wedding (New York: Bantam Books, 1958), p. 122.

his being black. His violent desire to free himself of the restraints placed upon him by the white man can also be viewed as an expression of the dark yearning of his soul to free itself of terrestrial confinement and seek consummation through death, that final release. The death wish can be readily discerned in Honey; his restlessness leads him to violence and destruction, and he seeks partial fulfillment and temporary release through drugs.

To further underscore the diabolical darkness which permeates his soul, Big Mama, in a fit of irritation, addresses him as "Satan." Even Berenice, despite her deep love for her foster brother, is convinced that he is bound for doom. At the conclusion of the novel, he is caught robbing a store, while under the influence of marijuana, and is sentenced to eight years on the chain gang. The play is even more explicit in its handling of racial tension and violence and plays up Honey's basic self-destructive urge as part of the issue. In the latter version Honey attacks a white man with a razor for refusing to serve him. Just before he is caught he tells Berenice, "For the first time, I'm free and it makes me happy. . . . Let them hang me--I don't care."<sup>13</sup> After he's caught he hangs himself in his cell and thus secures his ultimate freedom. In his search for self-definition through violence and self-destruction, he closely resembles Faulkner's Joe Christmas.

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<sup>13</sup> The Member of the Wedding [play] (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 110.

Frankie feels an inexplicable "connection" with Honey and yearns desperately to communicate something to him, but is unable to express her feeling in words: "F. Jasmine and Honey left the house at the same time, and she was still fretted by the feeling that she had something to say to him."<sup>14</sup> Although her instinct sharpens, she is still unable to identify it in words: "There was something she ought to tell Honey, a warning or some wise advice." (p. 125). Her groping for some connection or link with Honey is a reaching out for some fragment of herself, for Honey is the incarnate reflection of the violence and darkness that troubles her own soul. Like him, she is filled with restless yearning to flee the trap that has her tightly locked in. Malin observes that the repeated pattern of The Member of the Wedding is "expansion and entrapment."<sup>15</sup> In communicating this feeling of entrapment, Berenice tells Frankie:

"Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored peoples. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself. So we caught that firstway I was telling you, as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored people also. Sometimes a boy like Honey feel like he just can't breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself. Sometimes it just about more than we can stand."  
(pp. 113-14)

Frankie sympathizes and admits that she feels exactly the same way: "Sometimes, I feel like I want to break something,

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<sup>14</sup> The Member of the Wedding, p. 124. Subsequent quotations cited from this edition by page number within chapter.

<sup>15</sup> New American Gothic (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 115.

too. I feel like I wish I could just tear down the whole town" (p. 114). For both Frankie and Honey the only way to escape the trap is through violence and destruction.

All of Frankie's actions seem to conform to this pattern of irrationality and violence. There are repeated references to the unknown sin she and Barney MacKean have committed. She has a decided penchant for lethal weapons and carries a pocket knife that she has stolen from Sears and Roebuck. In an attempt to release the tension that is pent up inside her, she throws knives in the kitchen. She even steals her father's gun, and at one point threatens to shoot herself. In her all too frequent moments of frustration, she bangs her head on the table, and in her most desperate fits declares she wishes she were dead. The most explicit example of her destructive desperation is found in the letter which she leaves her father when she runs away from home: "'I cannot stand this existence any longer because my life has become a burden'" (p. 141). This kind of ennui and worldweariness may be acceptable for Madame Bovary, but it is hardly appropriate behavior for an American adolescent.

Most peculiar of all in this pattern of destruction is the image of snow associated with both Honey and Frankie. In the novel snow is street talk for marijuana, which for Honey offers a temporary release from a miserable existence, a welcomed reminder of death. The image of snow is dominant in all of Frankie's romantic fantasies, and even her plays have wintry snowy settings. She envies John Henry, her six

year-old cousin, because he has seen snow. And she associates snow with her romantic image of Berenice and her first husband, Ludie Freeman, because they too experienced snow while living in the North. But these associations with snow are also chilling portents of death. John Henry dies of Meningitis at the end of the novel, and Berenice tells Frankie that Ludie died of pneumonia during the most severe winter she has ever experienced.

While Honey mirrors the tension, violence and longing for death within Frankie, Big Mama appeals to her intuitive, superstitious nature. A firm believer in the old woman's supernatural insights and powers, Frankie visits her on the eve of her brother's wedding in order to have her fortune told. As a child she associated Big Mama "with the three ghosts who lived in the coalhouse" (p. 119). And she continues to retain "an eerie feeling" about the old woman (p. 119). Everything about Big Mama, her house and her style of fortunetelling bespeaks the dark, the mysterious and the supernatural.

She begins the ritual by asking Frankie to recount her latest dream which she interprets and imbues with signs of portentous significance. Completely absorbed by her powers, Frankie hangs intently on every word and action of the fortune-teller. When Big Mama, with her back to the kitchen, calls to Honey to take his feet off the kitchen table, Frankie is convinced that the old woman has the power to see through a blank wall. Later Honey explains to her



that Big Mama watched his movements through one of the many mirrors in the room, mirrors that remind us once again that what is reflected in the room are bits and pieces of the irrational component of Frankie's psyche.

Her visit to the fortuneteller assumes the proportions of a voyage of self-discovery, in terms of the dark elements which lurk within her own soul, and the actual trip to Big Mama's bears all the mythic trappings of a journey to the underworld. The old woman's house is located in the center of Sugarville, the "colored" section of town, and in effect it becomes a journey to the heart of darkness. Significantly enough, it takes place in the evening. As Frankie winds her way through the darkest and most dangerous corners of the city, she finds herself drawn to the jail, as though she intuits some "connection" between herself and those lodged within. Like her and Honey, they too experience the feeling of entrapment and the yearning to be free. She is particularly proud of her vague and indirect acquaintance with a few past inmates, all of whom are black. So alluring is the mystique of the jail and its dark prisoners that she has created her own myth about "the Black Maria":

When you were arrested, the Black Maria screamed to your house, and a crowd of policemen burst into the door to haul you off down to the jail. After she took the three-bladed knife from the Sears and Roebuck Store, the jail had drawn the old Frankie-- and sometimes on those late spring afternoons she would come to the street across from the jail, a place known as Jail-Widow's Walk, and stare for a long time. Often some criminals would be hanging to the bars; it seemed to her that their eyes, like the long eyes of the Freaks at the fair, had called to her as though to say: We know you. (pp. 117-18).

Just as she feels some mystical kinship with the faces behind the bars, so too does she sense a strange "connection" with everyone she encounters on the streets of Sugarville. As she leaves Big Mama's, she encounters Honey to whom she feels the overwhelming need to communicate some inexplicable intuition.

The return journey proves to be even more fraught with peril, for it climaxes with Frankie's violent encounter with the soldier whom she had met earlier during the day. She hurries away from Big Mama's to her rendezvous at the Blue Moon, the town's sleazy passion pit, little suspecting the dishonorable intentions of the soldier. The garishness of the Blue Moon as compared with the outside captures the attention of Frankie and serves as a reminder of its underworld character. After the soldier proposes they visit his room, Frankie begins to sense the danger of her predicament. The uneasy silence evokes memories of her violent past--the theft from Sears and the secret sin with Barney MacKean. When the soldier makes advances to her, she instinctively retaliates swiftly and violently by smashing a pitcher of water over his head and beating a hasty retreat from the scene of the crime, convinced that she has killed a man. She returns home safely, but with a heightened awareness of man's propensity for evil as well as a fuller understanding of the darker forces that shape her own soul. From this point on she sheds the identity of Frankie, the tomboy, and F. Jasmine, the romantic heroine, and begins to see herself

as Frances, the emerging adult.

In gaining knowledge of the dark, irrational forces, Frankie also learns about the nature of erotic love from Berenice Sadie Brown, the Addams's black housekeeper and her own constant companion. Just as Honey comes to symbolize violence and self-annihilation, and Big Mama instinct and intuition, Berenice epitomizes Eros and the eternal search for love as defined in Plato's Symposium. In his study of Platonic analogues in Southern fiction, Baldanza has made much of the affinity between the dialogue on love in the Symposium and the "twilight kitchen seminar" on love conducted by Berenice who acts in the Socratic capacity of teacher while Frankie and her cousin John Henry listen and comment.<sup>16</sup>

Berenice's homespun philosophy of love is a personal commentary on her own experiences with romantic love. She begins her discourse by recounting her first marriage to Ludie Freeman, the only man with whom she has ever felt a complete spiritual oneness. At the height of their happiness, Ludie suddenly dies leaving her a bewildered, fragmented soul. The significance of Ludie's surname should not escape our attention. Upon his death, which is a spiritual release from earthly bondage, he is truly made a "Freeman." Although death frees him, it leaves in Berenice an aching emptiness and a desperate yearning to restore the missing part of her soul. This yearning to be made whole again is explained by Aristophanes in the Symposium as the result of Zeus's divi-

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<sup>16</sup> "Plato in Dixie," p. 159.

sion of man into two parts so that henceforth he would engage in the eternal search for his other half. Similarly, Berenice sets out to find her missing half and begins "to marry off little pieces of Ludie" in a futile effort "to repeat me and Ludie" (p. 101). She is attracted to her second husband because his mashed thumb resembles Ludie's and to her third because his physique is similar to Ludie's and he owns Ludie's coat.

The moral of Berenice's lecture comes by way of a warning against the dangers of romantic love and the miseries and suffering that lie in store for the lover, a message not unlike that of Socrates in the Phaedrus. Her own sufferings as a lover are ample testimony to the validity of the warning, which is particularly addressed to Frankie whom she chides for having fallen in love with the wedding. But falling in love is a mysterious, irrational act without rhyme or reason, and as Berenice herself acknowledges, any person or thing can be a fit object for love. Frankie's act of falling in love with a wedding is no more than a reflection of Berenice's own irrationality in marrying men who remind her of her first husband.

In attempting to define the curious relationship between Frankie and Berenice, Fiedler views it as a variant of the black-white homosexual pair, being female rather than male, with Berenice transformed from the "Father-Slave-Beloved" to the "Mother-Sweetheart-Servant."<sup>17</sup> His interpretation de-

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<sup>17</sup> The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, I (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), p. 149.

serves some consideration in light of the quasi-erotic passage in which Berenice takes Frankie into her arms:

F. Jasmine rolled her head and rested her face against Berenice's shoulder. She could feel Berenice's soft big ninnas against her back, and her soft wide stomach, her warm solid legs. She had been breathing very fast, but after a minute her breath slowed down so that she breathed in time with Berenice; the two of them were close together as one body, and Berenice's stiffened hands were clasped around F. Jasmine's chest. (p. 113)

This passage, along with Berenice's undeniable jealousy of Mary Littlejohn, who replaces her as Frankie's companion at the end of the novel, lends credence to Fiedler's contention.

Berenice's symbolic function is highly complex and fraught with ambiguity, for she seems to straddle the line between reason and passion--between the white man's world and the black man's world. Of all the characters, black and white, she is the most able to integrate herself successfully in both cultures, by synthesizing what is natural to her black soul with what is normally alien to it. Her peculiarly dichotomous nature is outwardly manifested in her eyes, one of which is "dark and sad," while the other, which is made of bright blue glass, is "fixed and wild." Her choice of a blue eye to replace her missing one signifies the artificial espousal of the white man's virtues, reason, practicality and restraint.

Although she indulges in nostalgic longing for her past life with Ludie Freeman, she lives in the present and maintains a common sense approach to everyday living, attitudes which make her intolerant of Frankie's romantic illu-

sions. When Frankie stretches a remark about her tallness into an exaggerated compliment about how she has the build of a model or a movie star, Berenice brings her back to earth, and then chastises her for her self-deception:

"This is a serious fault with you, Frankie. Somebody just makes a loose remark and then you cozen it in your mind until nobody would recognize it. Your Aunt Pet happened to mention to Clorina that you had sweet manners and Clorina passed it on to you. For what it was worth. Then next thing I know you are going all around and bragging how Mrs. West thought you had the finest manners in town and ought to go to Hollywood, and I don't know what all you didn't say. You keep building on to any little compliment you hear about yourself. Or, if it is a bad thing, you do the same. You cozen and change things too much in your own mind. And that is a serious fault." (p. 31)

In the ordinary humdrum business of life, Berenice takes a practical, no-nonsense approach completely consistent with the behavior of the white people with whom Frankie maintains intimate contact. Obstinate aware of Berenice's determination to pop holes in her illusive dreams, Frankie adamantly resists:

The argument that afternoon was, from the beginning to the end, about the wedding. Berenice refused to follow F. Jasmine's frame of mind. From the first it was as though she tried to catch F. Jasmine by the collar, like the Law catches a no-good in the wrong, and jerk her back where she had started--back to the sad and crazy summer that now seemed to F. Jasmine like a time remembered from long ago. But F. Jasmine was stubborn and not to be caught. Berenice had flaws to find in all of her ideas, and from the first word to the last she did her terrible, level best to try and deny the wedding. But F. Jasmine would not let it be denied. (p. 73)

Berenice's refusal to allow Frankie to romanticize the wedding is typical of the attitude which all the white characters assume toward Frankie. In a trying effort to appeal

to her sense of reason, they attempt to argue her out of her irrational, impulsive behavior by restraining her emotionally, as well as physically. Her brother Jarvis, whom she idolizes, inadvertently stabs at her illusions about cold, faraway places when he writes about the mosquitoes that pester him in Alaska. When he returns home, he brings her an unimaginative gift which disappoints her greatly because it has no particular association with Alaska.

Nevertheless, Frankie dotes on Jarvis and his fiancée, Janis, in whom she sees herself and whom she identifies as "the we of me." To her, Janis and Jarvis are so much alike that they seem to belong together. She is particularly struck by the harmonious ring of their names together and by the remarkable fact (at least to her mind) that they both begin with the same two letters. In order to identify herself with them, she secretly determines to change her name to Jasmine so that it will be more like theirs.

The irony of Frankie's romanticizing of the bridal couple is that they are alike in precisely that way which makes them dull, unromantic and unimaginative people. In short, they are completely lacking in passion and vitality. Janis's brief conversations with Frankie consist of commonplace remarks about her unusual height (about which she is already self-conscious), her age and grade in school, and her delight that she'll be gaining a little sister--all of which is not only prosaic, but personally degrading to Frankie. From beginning to end the wedding is a series of disappointments

and shattered illusions. Frankie reluctantly decides to forego wearing the fancy cocktail dress she had purchased especially for the wedding when she sees that everyone else is informally dressed. She is particularly disappointed that Janis sets the pace by wearing a suit rather than the usual wedding gown and long veil, a gesture which further underscores the emphasis on practicality rather than romance. Throughout the wedding, she is treated kindly, but condescendingly, as though she were a child. But the bitterest disillusionment for Frankie comes at the end of the wedding when Janis and Jarvis politely, but firmly refuse to take her along on the honeymoon.

Her illusions about the bridal couple and the wedding itself are by no means the only illusions about romantic love which are shattered. Her sordid rendezvous with the drunken soldier also proves to be a painful series of disillusionments right from the start. Frankie envisions the soldier as being from Hollywood, New York or maybe even Maine; she is both startled and disappointed to learn that he is just a "hometown" boy from Arkansas. Because her imagination is broad and all-encompassing, she tends to think in terms of the universe and of vast and distant places, and is unable to comprehend the finiteness of provincial localities or their native sons, like the G. I. Arkansan. She then asks the soldier where he is going, meaning to what foreign country he will be sent. But the soldier with his limited grasp of the immediate and the finite, misunderstands the question,



and answers that he is on a three-day pass, and his immediate destination is the Blue Moon hotel.

Their conversation continues at cross purposes. Frankie enthusiastically discusses the war and the limitless possibilities it offers for travel and excitement. Having no comment and being unable to share in her enthusiasm, the soldier merely guzzles his beer in response. Unlike Frankie, who is overly polite, he is insultingly condescending in his moments of coherence. His coarseness and vulgarity stand in stark contrast to Frankie's refinement, a constant reminder that his soul is firmly rooted in the earth while hers takes flight among the clouds. The end result of her meeting with the soldier is the dissolution of her romantic fantasies about dates with older men, particularly G. I.'s.

Frankie's relationship with the soldier is but a brief interlude and could scarcely be called intimate. But the special relationship she shares with her down-to-earth father has more troubling ramifications. A good-natured man whose ruling passion is common sense, he is totally lacking in compassion and understanding for his daughter and is so absorbed in his jewelry shop that he is completely oblivious to her romantic sensitivity. Instead he feels compelled to curb her impulsive and irrational behavior. The significant turning point in their relationship occurs at the outset of the novel when Frankie is turned out of her father's bed where she has slept for years "but not because she was afraid of the dark" (p. 20). Although her father's rejection is de-

livered in fun: "'Who is this great big long-legged twelve-year-old blunderbuss who still wants to sleep with her old Papa'" (p. 22), nevertheless, it wounds Frankie to the quick: "She began to have a grudge against her father and they looked at each other in a slant-eyed way" (p. 22).

Her father antagonizes and humiliates her even more when he shatters her dream about being "a member of the wedding" by dragging her out of the bridal pair's car as they prepare to leave on their honeymoon. But most significant of all, is the culminating action of the novel. When Frankie runs away from home, it is her father who notifies "the Law" and has her brought back home. The symbolic function of her father and "the Law" are one and the same, the purpose of both being to curb and restrain the darker impulses and passions of the soul, and ultimately to destroy one's freedom. Just as her father is the White Man, the embodiment of reason and restraint, "the Law" is the White Man's Law, which imprisons her black friends and which stifles her own darker impulses by preventing her escape.

In succumbing to the powers of reason, vis-a-vis "the Law," Frankie is forced to accept the futility of her dreams to establish oneness with the world by impulsively rushing out to meet it head-on:

The world was now so far away that Frances could no longer think of it. She did not see the earth as in the old days, cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour; the earth was enormous and still and flat. Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross. The plans for the movies or the Marines were only child plans that would

never work, and she was careful when she answered. She named the littlest, ugliest place she knew, for to run away there could not be considered so very wrong. (p. 140)

In her collision with "the Law," Frankie abruptly awakens to the realization of her earthly limitations as a human being. No longer does she think in terms of the world and of discovering herself within its vast recesses. Her view of the world suddenly narrows to her immediate locale, thereby dissipating some of her romantic fervor and forcing her to accept in its place a more reasonable perspective of things. From this point on, the pattern of Frankie's life is drastically altered, as her imagination is tempered with a saner vision, and her impulsiveness gives way to reason.

Shortly after she returns home, her old relationship with Berenice is supplanted by her new-found friendship with Mary Littlejohn, who is Berenice's opposite in every way. She is young, white, blond, cosmopolitan, well-educated and even Catholic--none of which Berenice approves of. She is an ideal portrayal of the way Frankie would like to be--from her long blond hair to her first-hand knowledge of foreign countries. As surrogate mother, Berenice is also replaced by Aunt Pet, with whom she and her father go to live after John Henry's tragic death from meningitis.

In general Frankie's exposure to white people is increased, while her association with black people is diminished, a symbolic indication of the ascendancy of reason over passion. But Frankie still retains her old dream of traveling around the world, although now she speaks of it

almost casually rather than with the desperate frenzy of the old Frankie. If, as Frankie perceives, the world has quit spinning so fast, it is a reflection of Frankie's own slackened pace, a pace which had earlier been as ungainly as her uncontrollable spurt of growth. These constant references to Frankie's extraordinary height suggest the organic qualities of a sprouting tree. Like that tree, Frankie now grows tall and straight, with her head in the clouds and her feet buried in the earth.

In this chapter we have seen how modern American adolescence is projected through the myth of the American Adam into the archetypal pattern of man's fall from innocence in his eternal quest for self-knowledge, a search which leads him to fathom the darkest regions of his very being. We will next consider Mrs. McCullers' latest novel, Clock without Hands, with an eye toward romanticism which expresses itself in regional as well as universal terms.

## CHAPTER VI

### SELFHOOD AND THE SOUTHERN PAST: A Reading OF CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS

The last of Carson McCullers' novels published in her lifetime, Clock without Hands, appeared in 1961, a novel little understood and much maligned. Schorer and Louis Rubin typify the negative response in their criticism of it as a novel primarily concerned with political and racial issues in the South, in short a quasi-propaganda piece for civil rights.<sup>1</sup> If critics are disappointed by the novel, then by the same token, thoughtful readers of the work are apt to be disappointed by the parochial views of such critics, for a circumspect reading reveals that, while the novel ostensibly deals with political and social issues, at bottom it is about as vehement a protest against racial prejudice and segregation as is Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!.

In the final analysis the novel relies on the same romantic themes we have encountered in the other McCullers novels, erotic love and its veiled expression of the death wish concomitant with the search for self-definition, the latter a motif which we saw clearly delineated in The Member of the

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<sup>1</sup> The World We Imagine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), pp. 283-85. "Six Novels and S. Levin," Sewanee Review, 70 (Summer 1962), pp. 510-11.

Wedding in Frankie's quest for self-knowledge. The individual's attempt at self-discovery is a persistent pattern in Clock without Hands, a paradigm which resolves itself in a peculiarly Southern way. Self-definition in the present can be achieved only through knowledge of one's past, both public and private, but for many Southerners the quest becomes morbid because they would deny the passage of time. Oliver Evans, while acknowledging its obvious political overtones, is right in viewing Clock without Hands in its broader context as an examination of the search for selfhood, for the identity quest is readily discernible in the careers of the novel's principals, Judge Fox Clane, Jester Clane, Sherman Pew, and J. T. Malone, whose stories are closely interwoven in a way reminiscent of Mrs. McCullers' first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.<sup>2</sup>

Clock without Hands is the logical culmination of the McCullers genius for characterization, since the characters in this last novel are essentially composites of those who appeared in earlier novels. This is particularly true of Judge Clane who combines the best and worst of Mr. Antonapoulos in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Miss Amelia in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, although he is far more complex than either and is, as Evans points out, the most fully realized of all the writer's characters.<sup>3</sup> The Judge's child-like

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<sup>2</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), pp. 171-73.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

petulance and selfishness, his insatiable appetite, and his grotesque corpulence cannot help but remind the reader of Antonapoulos. As a member of one of the first families of Milan, Georgia, its leading citizen and property owner, he exercises noblesse oblige and commands obeisance in much the same fashion as Miss Amelia. Like her, he has a keen interest in justice and the law. He is an ardent segregationist who scrupulously subscribes to a double standard of justice contingent on the color of a man's skin. A loyal grandson of the Confederacy, he harbors the firm conviction that slavery is benign and moral and couples these feelings with the Southern aristocrat's horror of miscegenation. An idealist and romantic whose nostalgia for the Old South degenerates into mawkish sentimentality (he believes Gone with the Wind far excels Shakespeare), the Judge, like many other Southern reactionaries, has a grand design of resurrecting the South through a highly impractical scheme of redeeming Confederate money.

The Judge's passionate love and devotion to the South and the lost cause parallels his feelings for his own family. Indeed, in his mind, his family and the South are so closely identified that they are practically indistinguishable, for both have brought him grief and suffering. The gloomy Victorian mansion in which he and his grandson Jester live is a testament both to the memory of the South and to the Judge's departed loved ones. It is a public and private museum which houses the personal mementos of his dead wife and son,

as well as the currency with which he hopes to one day resurrect the South.

The Judge's grandson is a male variation of Mrs. McCullers' tomboy protagonists, Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams, sharing their artistic aspirations and their acute growing pains. Like them he is a restless seeker, a lover in search of a love object. His childhood and adolescence have been marked by a succession of secret loves or "crushes," involving both sexes. A member of that group of superior children who are alienated by their special talents and perceptions, Jester Clane, like Mick and Frankie, is a solitary figure, a misfit who doesn't "belong," since he does not embrace the cherished traditions and segregationist attitudes of his grandfather, the town, or the South itself. As J. T. Malone smugly observes, he is an alien, a "stranger" in his own community.

Jester is not alone in his alienation from the Southern community; he has a black counterpart in Sherman Pew, his blue-eyed mulatto peer whose origins remain a mystery throughout most of the novel. Sherman is in the tradition of the mulatto protagonist, ubiquitous in Southern fiction, and is quite closely akin to Faulkner's Joe Christmas in his struggle for identity and his subconscious urge toward self-destruction. But he is by no means unique in Mrs. McCullers' fiction. He represents a fuller realization of two earlier black adolescents, Lancy Davis, a relatively minor figure in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, and Honey Camden Brown, Bere-



nice's half-brother in The Member of the Wedding. These latter figures suffer from acute identity crises and are prone to violence and self-destruction. At an early age, Lancy unsuccessfully attempts to emasculate himself. He later distinguishes himself by winning Dr. Copeland's essay contest on the advancement of the Negro with a militant essay advocating black supremacy and separatism. But he meets a violent end when he is killed in a brawl that erupts between white and black youths at the local carnival.

Honey's streak of violence and his self-destructive urge are a constant source of anxiety to Berenice. She tells Frankie about Honey's troubled soul and his constant yearning to be rid of the racial barriers that inhibit his free spirit. His habitual use of marijuana strongly hints at the death wish, and it is the drug itself that finally drives him to commit an act of violence. It is important to point out here that Honey, like Sherman, is a mulatto whose restless yearning is unconsciously tied to the problem of his mixed blood. In their attempts to reconcile their inner conflicts, Joe Christmas, Honey Brown, and Sherman Pew are each invariably forced into a confrontation with white society which is their undoing. All are filled with the restless urge "to do something" to alleviate the explosive tension within. Honey steals from a white man (in the play, The Member of the Wedding, he assaults a white man and later hangs himself in the jail), but the other two commit unpardonable offenses against white society: Joe Christmas co-

habits with a white woman and Sherman moves into a white neighborhood, taboos for which they pay with their lives.

The brutal murder of Sherman Pew which forms the climax of the novel underscores the work's preoccupation with death, dying and the dead. These themes most clearly coalesce, however, in the story of J. T. Malone, the town druggist who has just been told in the beginning of the novel that he is dying of leukemia. The rest of his story revolves around his spiritual preparation for death, and, as Evans observes, it assumes allegorical proportions with the dying druggist as a kind of Everyman figure.<sup>4</sup> Malone is not an unfamiliar figure, for he has much in common with Biff Brannon, the cafe owner in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Both are malcontents, dissatisfied with the monotonous pattern of their lives, particularly their marriages. They suffer from masculine identity crises because their wives are overbearing castrators. The tell-tale sign in Biff is his effeminacy which becomes even more pronounced after his wife's death.

In the case of Malone, masculinity is equated with life, and the sudden realization that he is going to die brings an unconscious acknowledgement of his loss of virility. His wife can and will manage without him because she is a shrewd woman who has been more aggressive in business than he. She has inherited property, purchased Coca-Cola stock, and founded a thriving food service. In short, she

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

is a more genteel version of Thomas Wolfe's enterprising Eliza Gant. Even the drugstore is Malone's only by right of his marriage since it was purchased from his wife's father. The instrument and emblem of his profession, the pestle, similarly acquired from his father-in-law, is equated with his masculinity and symbolizes his ability to perform the manly task of supporting his family:

He was alone. He sat in the rocking chair with a compounding pestle in his hands. The pestle was gray and smooth with use. He had bought it with the other fixtures of the pharmacy when he had opened his business twenty years ago. It had belonged to Mr. Greenlove--when had he last remembered him?--and at his death the estate sold the property. How long had Mr. Greenlove worked with this pestle? And who had used it before him? . . . The pestle was old, old and indestructible. Malone wondered if it wasn't a relic from Indian times. Ancient as it was, how long would it still last? The stone mocked Malone.<sup>5</sup>

Malone is by no means the only character who suffers from some kind of identity crisis, for the Judge, Jester and Sherman are also engaged in the struggle for selfhood. All three are romantics given to idealizing and fantasizing, lovers of a type described in the Platonic dialogues, actively engaged in the search for a beloved who in effect is the ideal representation of themselves; hence, they are narcissistic. This is quite clearly the case with Judge Clane, who vainly though naively, sees himself as the messiah of the South: "A fixed star in the galaxy of Southern statesmanship. A man of vision, duty and honor. A glory to this

<sup>5</sup> Clock without Hands (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), pp. 20-21. Subsequent quotations from this edition cited by page number within the chapter.

fair state and to the South" (p. 190). His favorite pastimes are reminiscing about his great accomplishments as congressman and rereading the worn news clippings in praise of his achievements, further indications of his strong identification with the Southern past. So closely does he identify with the South, that in his own mind he becomes the South, a man whose rise and fall parallel that of his homeland. This is why his dream of resurrecting the South is such an obsession; his own fate is inextricably bound to it. The success of his scheme to redeem Confederate money would not only restore the fortune of the South, but his own as well. Thus, two injustices would be rectified; the South would reclaim her former glory, and Judge Clane as her heroic native son would regain his wealth and prestige.

Moreover, such an act of Southern patriotism would earn him a place in the annals of history and would insure the Judge of the immortality he so desperately craves:

Immortality, that was what the Judge was concerned with. It was inconceivable to him that he would actually die. He would live to a hundred years if he kept to his diet and controlled himself . . . deeply he regretted the extra toast. He didn't want to limit his time for just a hundred years, wasn't there a South American Indian in the newspaper who lived to be a hundred and fifty . . . and would a hundred and fifty years be enough? No. It was immortality he wanted. Immortality like Shakespeare, and if "push came to shovel," even like Ben Jonson. In any case he wanted no ashes and dust for Fox Clane. (p. 87)

But there is yet another way through which Judge Clane aspires to immortality, and that is through his progeny. He sees himself first in his son Johnny, and after Johnny's

death, in his grandson Jester. Herein the Judge proves himself the master of self-deception.<sup>6</sup> When quizzed by his grandson about Jester's dead father, the Judge tells him that he and his son were like "blood twin brothers," a phrase that smacks of narcissism. However, precisely the opposite is true. Never were father and son more unlike than Fox and Johnny Clane, the former garrulous and gregarious, the latter reticent and reserved. Although the son followed the father's footsteps in his choice of profession, here the resemblance ended, for he vehemently rejected the Judge's segregationist's attitudes. While the Judge was an arch reactionary, the son was an ardent liberal pursuing the cause of civil rights. And it was this critical conflict in ideology which was largely responsible for Johnny's suicide, a tragic act for which the Judge spends a lifetime trying to absolve himself of guilt.

After his son's death, the Judge transfers all his love and affection to his grandson, who in the old man's mind comes to replace the dead son as a living reflection of himself: "A mirrorlike projection reflected his own feelings for his grandson" (p. 29). In his attempt to shape Jester in his own image and likeness, the Judge's distorted vision causes him to mistakenly regard Jester as his son rather than his grandson, an identity which the boy, engaged in his own search for selfhood, is anxious to repudiate. When his grandfather refers to him as his own child, Jester

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<sup>6</sup> The Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 178.

hastens to correct him: "'Anyway I'm not your child. I'm your grandson and my father's child!'" (p. 29).

This distinction is all-important in Jester's struggle for identity. Basically he regards himself as an orphan having been kept much in the dark about his father's past. Despite that, he feels a strong identification with his dead father and senses that the questions which plague him--"Who am I? What am I? Where am I going?"--will not be satisfactorily answered until he knows the truth about his father. At one point he describes the tormenting burden of his identity metaphorically to his grandfather: "'I was like a cat always climbing the wrong tree'" (p. 183). He nags and implores the old man to tell him more about his father and finally succeeds in eliciting the information he seeks. He learns that his father defended a black man in a highly controversial case (over which Judge Clane presided) and became so despondent over the tragic outcome of the trial that he committed suicide shortly after his client's execution. With this new-found knowledge, Jester feels his identity as his father's son and his vocation as a lawyer are secured: "Night after night he dreamed of his father. And having found his father he was able to find himself. He was his father's son and he was going to be a lawyer. Once the bewilderment of too many choices was cleared away, Jester felt happy and free" (p. 182).

While Jester's self-discovery and identification with his father bring him hope, Sherman's quest brings him to the

brink of despair. Just as Jester's identity is tied to the search for his father, Sherman's is linked to the discovery of his mother. Unlike Jester, he has no family at all, having been found in a church, hence the surname Pew. His search is desperate and frenzied, and since he has no clues as to his parentage, he is reduced to clutching at straws. Jester mentions that perhaps Sherman's vibrant singing voice was inherited from his mother. He then speculates on Marian Anderson as a possible candidate. Sherman takes the suggestion in all seriousness and naively writes to her in hope that the mystery will be solved.

Sherman's search for his mother is also tied to the problem of his mixed blood, and his desire to affirm his blackness. He automatically assumes his mother is black and his father is white, and hence dismisses the question of his father's identity contemptuously, wishing to negate the influence of his white blood. This is difficult to do in light of the fact that his most striking feature is his blue eyes. The problem is one that deeply troubles Sherman as evidenced by his wistful "song of myself." When Jester first encounters him, he is singing a German Lied which translates "'The two blue eyes of my beloved, I've never seen anything like them.'" Jester's response on hearing the translation is particularly discerning: "'Your eyes are blue. It sounds like a love song to yourself; in fact, when I know the words of the song it makes me feel creepy!'" (p. 69).

Sherman's romance with the self is based on a kind of

love-hate passion resulting from this conflict of his mixed blood. He wants to embrace his blackness and at the same time repudiate his whiteness. In turning to the white community, he seeks affirmation of his black blood, not his white blood. This is why the discovery that his mother is white is so devastating to him:

At one o'clock that afternoon he found out that there was a man of his own race whom the Judge had had executed, and his name was Sherman. And there was a white woman who was accused of fucking the Negro. He could not believe it. Could he ever be sure? But a white woman, blue eyes, was all so otherwise than he had dreamed. It was like some eerie, agonizing crossword puzzle. And he, Sherman . . . Who am I? What am I? All that he knew at that hour was that he was sick. His ears were waterfalls of disgrace and shame. No, Marian Anderson had not been his mother, nor Lena Horne, nor Bessie Smith, nor any of the honeyed ladies of his childhood. He had been tricked. He had been cheated. He wanted to die like the Negro man had died. (pp. 189-90)

The dismaying discovery of his mother's true identity is the turning point in Sherman's story. First he despairs, then he is filled with the restless violence and self-annihilation urge that impels the mulatto protagonist to seek recognition from the white community by perpetrating some unpardonable offense. Frightened but desperate, Sherman commits one petty offense after another in order to gain attention. First he drinks from the white fountain in the courthouse square. Next he uses the white restroom in the bus station. Both of these acts go unnoticed, so he becomes more brazen and enters the white Baptist Church and even dares to sit at the counter in the drugstore. His frustration at these futile attempts to gain recognition is over-



whelming and turns to violence. In a fit of desperation he viciously hangs Jester's dog Tige, convinced that even the dog receives more attention than he does.

None of these acts gains him the recognition he seeks, and he finally determines to take the boldest step of all; he moves into an all-white neighborhood, knowing full well that he is in effect signing his own death warrant. The move is satisfying to him in the same way that Honey Brown feels fulfilled after he assaults a white man for refusing to serve him in the dramatic version of The Member of the Wedding. When Honey declares triumphantly to Berenice that for the first time he feels really free and that he is unafraid to face the white man's justice ("Let them hang me-- I don't care"), he is echoing the cry of all the Joe Christmases, Honey Browns and Sherman Pews who haunt the pages of Southern fiction. For the mulatto protagonist, recognition and freedom go hand in hand, and ultimately freedom is equated with death.

Sherman's relocation in the white neighborhood is satisfying to him for more than just the fact that it wins him recognition in the white community. It also provides him with a sense of power through the "ecstasy of ownership." If he can't "belong" to anyone, he can at least establish a sense of identity through acquisition. Sherman's compulsion to own things is not without its irony; since all of these things have been bought on credit, his white creditors actually own them, and in a sense, own him as well. His in-

debtedness to white creditors is not at all an assertion of his freedom of ownership, but is at bottom a modern variation of slavery.

Sherman's obsession with ownership completely baffles Jester as a member of the propertied class. When he warns Sherman that a plot is underfoot to bomb his house, Sherman refuses to leave the house which contains all his cherished possessions--his new furniture, his baby grand piano, and his elegant new wardrobe. Instead he chooses to remain and welcomes death as both an affirmation of his black identity and a release from the tormented bondage of his hell on earth. Sherman's death scene is dramatically suggestive of transcendence. At the moment when his house is bombed, he sits at the piano with his voice raised in deep dark song, in effect his swan song. However, Sherman's death has about it a certain irony, for in asserting his own identity by moving into the white neighborhood, he in turn threatens the identity of Sammy Lank, a poor white and a non-person in the community, who seizes upon the opportunity to murder his undesirable new neighbor as a means of gaining heroic recognition.

Although news of Sherman's death is generally greeted with a sigh of relief, there is one person who mourns his loss. Jester Clane has been powerfully drawn to Sherman from the first day of their meeting by a kind of "intoxicating" passion tantamount to "love at first sight." This attraction of the white male for the black male is a common

theme throughout much of American literature, as Fiedler points out, with its most notable occurrences in the Huck-Jim and Ishmael-Queequeg relationships. A variation of "the myth of the dark beloved," Eros is brought into play in these all male relationships which Fiedler describes as "the boy's homoerotic crush." He points out that in the myth the white male is typically a pariah--a "ragged woodsman," "despised sailor," or "unregenerate boy."<sup>7</sup> The latter is an accurate description of Jester who is tagged by Malone as a misfit, a "stranger" in his own hometown whom neither his grandfather nor any of the townsfolk can understand. Interestingly enough both he and Huck Finn are second generation pariahs, the sons of social outcasts and misfits.

Fiedler makes another observation about the homoerotic "Black-White" myth which is equally applicable in this case. He notes that invariably the myth embodies the role of the dark man as victim and points to Queequeg's fever, Crane's maimed Negro and the tormented Jim who is the butt of Tom's cruel jokes.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sherman is victimized by white society, first by its casual indifference toward him and finally by its murderous wrath.

The homoerotic relationship between Jester and Sherman adheres very closely to the patterns of the Tristan-Isolde romance and to the conventions of courtly love with

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<sup>7</sup> The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler, Vol. I (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 146-50.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

Jester as the white Tristan and Sherman, the "dark beloved" Isolde. Passion is a word that appears with great frequency throughout the novel, indicating the passionate natures of the characters as well as their tendency to embrace the role of lover. Once again everyone wants to be the lover. The Judge loves Jester who loves Sherman who loves Zippo Mullins. But Zippo forsakes Sherman by getting married and so too does Sherman forsake Jester and Jester forsake his grandfather.

Nevertheless, the word passion is used pointedly with reference to the Jester-Sherman relationship. The following passage describes their first meeting:

Jester, who had been drunk all evening and for the first time with passion, could not answer. For the passion of first youth is lightly sown but strong. It can spring into instant being by a song heard in the night, a voice, the sight of a stranger. . . . In early youth, love at first sight, that epitome of passion, turns you into a zombie so that you don't realize if you're sitting up or lying down and you can't remember what you have just eaten to save your life. Jester, who was just learning about passion, was very much afraid. He had never been intoxicated and never wanted to be. . . . Such a person is naturally afraid of love at first sight. Jester felt that if he touched Sherman it would lead to a mortal sin, but what the sin was, he didn't know. He was just careful not to touch him and watched him with the zombie eyes of passion.  
(pp. 72-73)

Aside from these constant references to passion, we can hardly escape making the comparison between the Jester-Sherman relationship and the Tristan-Isolde affair simply because the musical score of Tristan is so often alluded to in the story. Both Sherman and Jester are passionately fond of music, particularly German Lieder. In an effort to win

the affection of Sherman, Jester buys the score and inscribes it as a gift to his beloved. We might well ask why this particular score, and the probable answer is that subconsciously Jester identifies with Tristan. Sherman dies before ever receiving the gift, and since everything he owns is destroyed in the bombing, the Tristan score is the only memento Jester retains of his dead beloved.

The Tristan score is by no means the only evidence that hints at this latent erotic relationship. In the romantic fashion there is the bestowal of gifts, the adulation, the suffering and the self-sacrifice of the lover. Jester tries to earn the favor of his beloved by ministering to him when he is sick, lavishing on him flowers and even caviar, which Sherman claims is his favorite food. In return for his goodness, he is repaid by abuse and contumely which culminates in the vicious killing of his dog. In short, Sherman mistreats Jester in the same way that he has been mistreated by his beloved Zippo, the mysterious roommate that he worships but who is conspicuously absent from the novel.

Despite his ill-treatment, Jester admires Sherman tremendously for his intellect and talent and tries to emulate him by adopting his vocabulary and witticisms and by absorbing his interest in Lieder. His dreams and fantasies are filled with acts of heroism in which he rescues Sherman and then dies in the effort. Overwhelmed by his feeling for Sherman, he impulsively kisses him on the cheek, a gesture

which flatters and disgusts him at the same time and moves him to react violently by striking Jester.

The youthful passion which first marked the relationship, however, does not continue unabated. De Rougemont points out that the absence of the beloved serves as an obstruction to the romance and thereby heightens passion, while the constant presence tends to diminish it. After Sherman begins working for the Judge, Jester's initial burst of passion subsides but his love remains constant: "The first of that fall was the happiest time Jester had ever known. At first lifted by the wings of song, his passion now had quieted to friendship. Sherman was in his home every day, and the security of constant presence alters passion which is fed by jeopardy and the dread of change, or loss" (pp. 121-22).

Despite the quieting effect of his passion for Sherman, Jester, like the blue-eyed mulatto, nevertheless remains a child of Eros. In both, the transcendent impulse runs strong. Sherman is consumed with passion--passion for social injustice, for food, for clothes, and for music, especially those Lieder which are dark and sad, poignant reminders of death. Jester too shares this love for music and the descriptions of his passion are often alluded to in lyrical language, as in the passage quoted in the preceding paragraph. The "wings of song" phrase strongly suggests the transcendent impulse of soaring, and the art of flying is a serious pursuit of Jester. As the novel begins, he is merely

a novice at flying, but by the end he has become an adroit pilot.

Throughout the novel he reiterates his conviction that it is the "responsibility" of everyone to learn to fly. He is correct in the most profound way, for in flying, we rise above our world in order to gain that broader vision of reality that ultimately leads us to truth. Such a vision is granted Jester in an illuminating moment that occurs when he takes Sammy Lank for a plane ride for the purpose of avenging Sherman's murder. But murderous passion is transformed to compassion for the pathetic victim, as Eros is supplanted by Agape:

Looking downward from an altitude of two thousand feet, the earth assumes order. A town, even Milan, is symmetrical, exact as a small gray honey comb, complete. The surrounding terrain seems designed by a law more just and mathematical than the laws of property and bigotry: a dark parallelogram of pine woods, square fields, rectangles of sward. On this cloudless day the sky on all sides and above the plane is a blind monotone of blue, impenetrable to the eye and the imagination. But down below the earth is round. The earth is finite. From this height you do not see man and the details of this humiliation. The earth from a great distance is perfect and whole. (p. 208)

This epiphany broadens his vision of reality so that he glimpses the universe in its wholeness and grandeur of design from above, rather than its fragmentation and disjointedness caused by the petty squabbles of men from below. And in this greater vision he transcends the limitations of time and space that have heretofore restricted and even distorted the vision of the other characters, each of whom has held his own private view of reality.

The Judge's vision is clouded by nostalgia and sentiment, vanity and pride. He envisions the Old South redeemed with himself restored to his former position of glory as her most eloquent statesman. J. T. Malone's view is more that of a victim of the present. He feels trapped by time and circumstance, a man who has been tricked by fate all his life. First he is deprived of a career as a doctor by the "Jew grinds" whose high grade point averages caused him to flunk out of a highly competitive medical school. Next he is conned into marrying a woman he doesn't love simply because her father is his employer. Finally he is cheated out of life itself by a terminal disease, which, ironically enough, is diagnosed by a Jewish doctor.

Although J. T. Malone lacks the imaginative facility to elude reality or to at least escape it, Sherman Pew, like the Judge, has mastered the art of deception. A compulsive liar, he makes up wild tales about trips to Europe, his white French fiancée and his daring exploits in civil rights. When asked by Jester why he feels compelled to lie to everyone, he tries to explain: "'It's not exactly lying, but sometimes I think up situations that could very well be true and tell 'em to baby-ass dopes like you. A lot of my life I've had to make up stories because the real, actual was either too dull or too hard to take'" (p. 126). Although Jester neglects to tell Sherman, he too is guilty of fantasizing to make reality more palatable, although his flights of imagination are of a more infantile sort. He dreams of



rescuing Marilyn Monroe or establishing his heroism in other similarly extravagant ways.

This inability or unwillingness to accept reality, which is the sense of the "now" or the present, is largely the result of the fact that all four principals are in one way or another haunted by history, or the sense of the past, be it public or private. Each of the characters is only too keenly aware of the past and of its impact on both the present and the future. The Judge's grand design is to "turn back the clock" and recreate the future out of the past. He strongly resists the exigencies of the present and anything which smacks of progress or advancement. He pooh-poohs doctors and science preferring to diagnose and prescribe for his own ills and those of his friends. To demonstrate his opposition to federal control, he refuses to pay his income tax and his maid Verily's social security.

His design to return to the past is so obsessive that it is governed by his personal, as well as his public, sense of the past. In his own life he tries to maintain a stasis which resists the present and change. His Victorian mansion is a mausoleum that houses the relics of his dead family with everything perfectly preserved and in its proper place, just as it was left by his dead wife, Miss Missy, and his dead son Johnny. In an effort to resurrect the past, he unconsciously seeks out living embodiments of both. He visits church choirs looking for women who possess his wife's distinctive qualities, her sonorous voice, her lovely bosom,

her graceful hands, and her adeptness with cards. In the same way he looks upon his grandson as a living embodiment of his dead son.

Jester is similarly caught up in this sense of the past in the search for knowledge of his dead father, intuiting that the key to understanding the present and planning for the future are tied to that search. The discovery of his father and the circumstances surrounding his death determine his identity as his father's son, his vocation as a lawyer, and his firm commitment to follow in his father's footsteps in the fight for social equality and justice in the South.

If Jester becomes the instrument of justice by which the conscience of the South will be purged, then Sherman is the embodiment of that guilt which haunts the Southern conscience. Given to brooding over the past, he sees himself as the black Everyman who keenly feels the burden of slavery and the persecution resulting from it. Every atrocity perpetrated against a black man he feels has been done to him personally: "Sherman brooded over every lynching, bombing or indignity that his race had suffered. In this Sherman had the vulnerability and sensitivity of an adolescent. Drawn to broodings on atrocities, he felt that every evil was reserved for him personally. So he lived in a stasis of dread and suspense" (p. 145).

In one way or another the Judge, Jester and Sherman are confronted by reality and this sense of the "pastness" of the present, to borrow T. S. Eliot's description. Much

of modern literature has been preoccupied with this same problem, and we cannot help but recall the plight of Stephen Dedalus who is tormented by history as "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Rather than escape history, however, Mrs. McCullers' characters wish to immerse themselves in the past, or knowledge of the past in order to see the present more clearly, operating on the premise that knowledge of one's public and private history ultimately leads to knowledge of oneself. Each tries to manipulate time and reality in his own way by moving it either forward through the push of the imagination or backward by retreating into the past, all in an effort to reconcile time past, present and future into that undivided state of timelessness, to which Eliot refers in "Burnt Norton":

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.

The words of Judge Clane concerning eternity, though considerably less eloquent and poetical, hint at essentially the same connection between all periods of time: "No, I don't believe in eternity as far as religion goes. I believe in the things I know and the descendants who come after me. I believe in my forebears, too. Do you call that eternity?" (p. 18). These words spoken to J. T. Malone are part of a lengthy discourse on death which occurs when Malone informs the Judge that he has leukemia. Malone's knowledge that he is going to die causes him to become obsessed with

time, as measured by the clock. He plans out the moments of his life meaningfully and efficiently in accordance with the time he has been given by the doctors. He is terrified by the notion that he is "a man watching a clock without hands" (p. 23).

Confronted with this overwhelming sense of helplessness, he becomes increasingly more dependent on his watch. Unlike Quentin Compson who, in an effort to escape mechanized time, wrenches the hands off his watch, J. T. is anxious to preserve every minute and second allotted him and is scrupulously careful about the time his watch keeps: "'This watch loses about two minutes every week,' he pettishly told the jeweler. 'I demand that my watch keep strict railroad time.' For in his limbo of waiting for death, Malone was obsessed with time. He was always deviling the jeweler, complaining that his watch was two minutes too slow or three minutes too fast" (p. 187).

Thus the clock without hands, while it is a congenial image for the suicidal Quentin, is a repugnant one to J. T. Malone who is quite unwilling to die. Nevertheless this preoccupation with time and domination by the sense of the past form a major theme in this McCullers novel which is very Faulknerian, and we cannot but wonder how influenced she was by him, directly or otherwise, in Clock without Hands. Certainly the characters are Faulknerian types--the suicidal son, the tragic mulatto, the conservative Judge (or colonel or some similar patriarchal figure). And the guilt and ret-

tribution generated by miscegenation are right out of the pages of Absalom, Absalom!.

This is by far Mrs. McCullers' most "Southern" novel, not in the parochial sense that it deals with political and social issues that are peculiar to the region, but in its embodiment of the tragic sense of history that is so uniquely Southern. What Chase says about The Sound and the Fury is undeniably true of Clock without Hands:

Before such a book as The Sound and the Fury could be written there had to be, of course, a funded history in the South. There had to be not only a past but a sense of the past. There had to be also . . . a modern mind to write it-- and by a modern mind I mean a divided, realistic,<sup>9</sup> ironic mind with a sense of the tragedy of history.

In the most profound way, Mrs. McCullers proves in this book that she shares with Faulkner, not only the tragic vision of the South, but the aesthetic sensibility with which to write about it. In this last novel we see the synthesis of the writer as romantic and regionalist, for her preoccupation with the myth of eros and the concomitant search for the self finds expression in uniquely regional terms in the Southerner's obsession with the past as a means to self-definition.

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<sup>9</sup> The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 220.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this study we have seen consistently at work in the novels of Carson McCullers a number of elements typically associated with romanticism, more specifically the peculiar brand of romanticism that developed in American fiction. The most conspicuous of these elements are the freedom from verisimilitude, the pervasive use of myth, the preoccupation with the darker side of life, and the infusion of poetry in prose. In short, the elements indigenous to the romance-novel as defined by Chase are also present in the fiction of Mrs. McCullers.

Her "liberal imagination" takes her beyond Howells' brand of realism where the novelist accumulates a massive amount of external detail in an effort to faithfully portray reality. Instead she takes the Hawthorne approach of the romancer choosing to "deal more with the clouds overhead" than with "any portion of the actual soil." The Ballad of the Sad Café with its compressed form and its fable-like atmosphere most nearly approximates the romance or tale as conceived by Poe and Hawthorne.

The origin of the romance of course lies well beyond the 19th century; its genesis is to be found in the medieval songs and ballads which deal with courtly love, an adulterous and therefore forbidden kind of love dominated by Eros. The

myth of Eros is epitomized and immortalized in the Tristan-Isolde legend in which love is identified with the death wish. The Eros myth is one of the two major myths which underlies the fiction of Mrs. McCullers. Passion is the ascendent trait in nearly all her characters, and the Eros myth appears in a number of varied forms as either heterosexual or homosexual love. It is present in the Singer-Antonapoulos relationship in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, in the Captain Penderton-Private Williams relationship in Reflections in a Golden Eye, in the Amelia-Lymon romance in The Ballad of the Sad Café, and in the Jester-Sherman relationship in Clock without Hands.

The Tristan-Isolde legend is the European analogue of the Eros myth, but as Fiedler points out, there is a peculiarly American variation of this myth which underlies the fabric of American fiction, a myth which arose from the varied racial composition of our country. This is the homoerotic myth of attraction between the white male and the black male. The American derivative of the Eros myth appears in the fiction of Mrs. McCullers, its most conspicuous presentation in the Jester-Sherman relationship of Clock without Hands. (Fiedler argues its presence in the quasi-erotic relationship of Frankie and Berenice in The Member of the Wedding.)

The extensive use of the European and American myths of Eros implies a preoccupation with the darker side of human nature and with man's propensity for evil. The death wish

which de Rougemont equates with erotic love is ubiquitous in Mrs. McCullers' novels. Mr. Singer, Private Williams, Captain Penderton, Honey Camden Brown, and Sherman Pew are all strongly drawn to death. Knowledge of the darker side of human nature is also part of the process of self-discovery. The journey of Captain Penderton into the forest and Frankie's twilight trip to Sugarville to have her fortune told are part of that archetypal voyage into the heart of darkness which leads to self-discovery through awareness of the individual's propensity for evil.

The dark journey is but one of the images suggestive of the search for selfhood in the novels. The other dominant images include the house, mirrors and reflections, and patterns of halves and pairs. (Malin pinpoints the house, the reflection, and the journey as key images in New American Gothic fiction.) All of these in some way suggest the basic narcissism inherent in erotic love which is at bottom a romance of the self. Mr. Antonapoulos in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter collects pictures of himself. The mirrors in The Member of the Wedding preoccupy Frankie who is in search of someone who epitomizes her idealization of herself. In Reflections in a Golden Eye (the title itself suggests the image), Anacleto attempts to become the twin of his mistress by affecting her speech patterns and imitating her mannerisms. There is a steady stream of paired images in The Ballad of the Sad Café beginning with Miss Amelia's "two gray crossed eyes" which focus inward on the self. In Clock



without Hands Judge Clane deludes himself into thinking that his son and later his grandson are living reflections of himself.

All of these images depict the self in search of completion; that is, the characters are in effect half-selves in the Aristophanic sense, and the fictional images that underscore this are images of fragmentation and disjointedness. The most dramatic depiction of this is the run-down house of Miss Amelia which has about it a "cracked" look that hints at the fragmentation of the half-self lodged within.

The Ballad of the Sad Café is significant not only because it typifies so well the scheme of images which appear consistently throughout the novels but because it is the primary example of the way in which Mrs. McCullers mixes genres, infusing poetry with prose. This brilliant tour de force is both a ballad and a tale, a romance and a novel. It particularly adheres to the form and substance of the ballad dealing with matters of courtly love and incorporating ballad structures, most notably the refrain or coda which appears in the concluding section of the chain gang, or "The Twelve Mortal Men." There is an innate, subtle lyricism to her prose style which reaches its finest expression in Reflections in a Golden Eye. Here the influence of 19th century romantic poetry is pervasive, and the rich, but controlled language, the distillation and refinement, and the aesthetic sensibilities are very Keatsian.

The artistic stasis maintained throughout that novel

reflects the writer's preoccupation with time and the effort of her more visionary characters to transcend mechanized time through epiphanies. Captain Penderton's daring plunge into the forest rapturously transports him into a world where clock time has no meaning. In Biff Brannon's illuminating moment, he glimpses "the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time."

This preoccupation with time and timelessness reaches its culmination in Clock without Hands where the characters are haunted by the sense of the past in the most Faulknerian way. In speaking of The Sound and the Fury, Chase argues that this sense of the past could only be perceived by a "modern mind--a divided, realistic, ironic mind with a sense of the tragedy of history." His notion of a "divided mind" aptly describes the dichotomous vision of Carson McCullers whose writing is filled with polarities, antitheses, contradictions and ambiguities. The imagery of black and white, light and dark, good and evil, passion and reason is pervasive. The Member of the Wedding is structured by such polarities. Frankie is drawn to white and black characters who respectively embody reason and passion. The central symbol of the dichotomy is Berenice with her romantic longing and her common sense, whose one dark eye and one light eye symbolize her divided spirit.

Mrs. McCullers' own divided vision is filled with a keen sense of the irony of life that enables her to reconcile pathos with humor. In "The Russian Realists and South-

ern Literature," she refers to Faulkner's tragicomic vision which surfaces in As I Lay Dying. But in Clock without Hands her own tragicomic vision is superbly demonstrated in a scene, the irony of which Faulkner himself, had he read the book, could not have failed to appreciate. Desirous of sympathy from Judge Clane, J. T. Malone solemnly informs his friend that he is dying of a rare blood disease. The Judge in utter disbelief pooh-poohs the idea and launches into a diatribe on blood lines: "'A rare blood disease! Why, that's ridiculous--you have some of the best blood in this state. I well remember your father who had his wholesale pharmacy on the corner of Twelfth and Mulberry in Macon. And your mother I remember, too--she was a Wheelwright. You have the best blood in this state in your veins, J. T., and never forget that."

In the final analysis the question posed by Chase concerning the ultimate objective of the romance-novel must also be asked of the novels under examination: "To what purpose have these amiable tricks of romance been used? To falsify reality and the human heart or to bring us round to a new, significant and perhaps startling relation to them?" The romanticism of Carson McCullers is hardly the type that runs rampant in escapist literature. Rather it is of the higher level aimed at confronting and depicting reality, not eluding it, though many of her characters are guilty of that. It is a kind of all-encompassing romanticism aimed at approaching reality from above and below rather than from the

surface (her characters are perpetually ascending and descending) in a broadened vision that aspires to truth.

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## VITA

Charlene Kerne Clark was born on April 15, 1947 in Thibodaux, Louisiana where she attended the public schools and graduated from Thibodaux High School in 1965. Ms. Clark received her B. A. in English from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette in 1969. She attended the University of Arkansas where she was awarded her M. A. in English in 1970.



EXAMINATION AND THESIS REPORT

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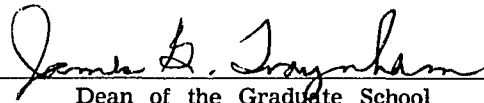
Major Field: English

Title of Thesis: Carson McCullers and the Tradition of Romance

Approved:

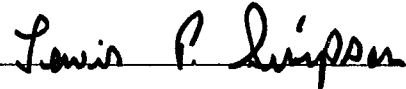


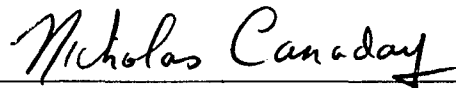
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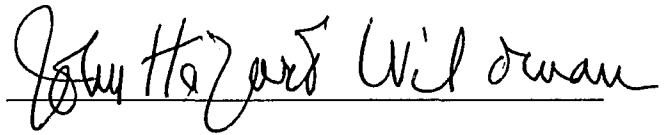
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:









Date of Examination:

July 22, 1974